

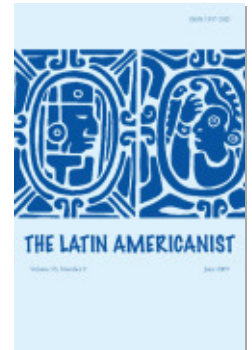


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Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans ed. by Jeffrey Lesser,
Raanan Rein (review)

Debora Cordeiro-Rosa

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These minor critiques should not detract from the book's importance. Rausch has provided an important decentering of Latin American history, explaining Colombian history from the periphery and from the middle. Further, it analyzes the emergence of a significant center of social, economic, and political importance, one of many such cities throughout Latin America that boomed in the second half of the twentieth century. Hopefully more studies like this one are forthcoming.

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RETHINKING JEWISH-LATIN AMERICANS. By Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, eds. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2008, p. 304, \$27.95.

Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein have vast experience in the field of Jewish Latin American literature and culture, and in this book they come together to bring new light to different aspects of Jewish Latin American ethnicity. As the editors explain in their introduction, this collection of essays tries to address the gap between discourse of state and political organizations, on the one hand, and social realities and practices, on the other. Most sources tend to emphasize xenophobic attitudes towards Jews in Latin America, as well as often times vacillating between claims that Jews are highly integrated into their societies and at the same time ghettoized. The literature in this area has, to a large extent, marginalized the Jewish experience in Latin America (4). The editors propose new approaches to the study of Jewish Latin America to bring clarification and correction to the existent bibliography.

The different authors invited to contribute address questions about ethnicity, national identity, and Diaspora. They show that "Jews are not unique" (5) but it is their Diasporic condition that makes them "like everyone else" (5). Latin American Jews are studied under a national context while their particular ethnic, national, and Diasporic experience is respected. With that in mind, Latin American Jews are not only Diasporic but also national, like any other minority that composes the rainbow of Latin American societies. Argentina and Brazil receive special attention as the countries with the largest Jewish-Latin American populations; nevertheless, each chapter presents questions and research approaches that can be applied to any minority group in any country. The editors present two essays that offer some useful historical information regarding the immigration of Jews to these countries, providing clarification to the reader less familiar with the subject.

In chapter two, "New Approaches to Ethnicity and Diaspora in Twentieth-Century Latin America," Lesser and Rein elaborate how the almost ten million Latin Americans who trace their ancestry to the Middle East, Asia, or Eastern Europe, or whose ancestry was characterized

religiously as non-Catholic, can be seen and studied. Academic production on ethnicity has given little attention to these minorities. The authors discuss the critical aspect of descriptive language in scholarship on ethnicity, the contents of scholarship on the Jewish past, and finalize with new approaches to implement Jewish-Latin American studies.

Lesser is the author of chapter three, "How the Jews Became Japanese and Other Stories of Nation and Ethnicity." Here Lesser makes a cross-ethnic comparison among Jewish, Arab, Japanese, and Koreans immigrants in Brazil, focusing on the question of national culture and how it creates similarities in some areas of ethnic life. This article calls the reader's attention to many myths and misconceptions common in Brazil.

In chapter four, "What's in a Stereotype? The Case of Jewish Anarchists in Argentina," José C. Moya offers a very detailed study of what it meant to be "Jewish" in early twentieth-century Argentina. Like other immigrants, Jews occupied a broad socioeconomic spectrum within the host society (80). At a time when three quarters of the population had been born somewhere else, Jewish ethnicity could not be constructed; their immigration and adaptation experience represented the norm in a society of foreigners and newcomers.

"Beyond the State and Ideology, Immigration of the Jewish Community to Brazil, 1937–1945" by Roney Cytrynowicz describes a period when Jewish institutional activities flourished in spite of discursive xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Contrary to what many historians have depicted, Jews were in fact able to apply several successful strategies to confront the rules of the Vargas regime. The author suggests that more research be done in order to investigate other positive aspects that have not been addressed, as well as the tendency of historians to focus on anti-Semitism, seeing Jews as passive victims and ignoring their courageous efforts to succeed in those turbulent times.

Chapter six, "The Scene of the Transaction: 'Jewishness,' Money, and Prostitution in the Brazilian Imaginary" by Erin Graff Zivin, reflects on the representations of Jewishness in the Latin American literary and cultural imaginary. The author comments on the presence of Jewish characters in works by famous writers, such as Borges, Darío, García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa, and how the presence of Jews in virtually every corner of Latin America has often gone unnoticed. By exploring the rhetorical linking of Jewishness, money, and prostitution in early twentieth-century Brazilian scenarios, Graff Zivin proposes an analysis of the ways the idea of the "Jew" is imagined. She observes that the ideas of "Jewishness" are redefined with the passing of time as constructions of ethnicity shift and ideological struggles evolve, as a way to confront issues of identity and difference (126).

Rosalie Sitman is the author of "Protest from Afar: The Jewish and Republican Presence in Victoria Ocampo's *Revista SUR* in the 1930s and 1940s". *SUR*, an Argentinean literary magazine created in 1931 by Victoria Ocampo, provides great testimony of the issues with which Argentine

intellectuals wrestled in the delicate years of the 1930s and 40s. The rise of Fascism and National Socialism in Europe, the Spanish Civil War, and the Second World War were some of the major international events that ultimately had a profound impact in Argentina and other Latin American countries. The author describes how *SUR* served as a channel of expression to many voices that could not be heard anywhere else, as well as confronting Argentinean politics, religious and cultural views of that time.

Sandra McGee Deutsch researches the history of Argentine-Jewish women from 1880 to 1955 and observes the role and interests of Jewish women of varied ethnic and class backgrounds. "Changing the Landscape, The Study of Argentine-Jewish Women and New Historical Vistas" discusses the strong presence of Jewish women in organizations such as the Junta de la Victoria created in 1941, and how women fought back with tenacity in spite of discrimination. Jewish women have played critical roles in Argentina and yet little is known about their fundamental importance.

In chapter nine, "Women's Organizations and Jewish Orphanages in Buenos Aires, 1918 – 1955," Donna J. Guy comments that "Most literature on the Jewish community in Argentina has dealt with political topics focusing on men" (188). Guy explains that her essay explores the role Jewish women played working to provide housing, religious instruction, and secular education for the orphans, poor children, and refugees in their community during the two world wars. Not many scholars have studied how Jewish women were capable of entering social spaces reserved for Catholic elites, and how they succeeded in many different aspects through their dedication to child welfare.

Edna Aizenberg, in "Nation and Holocaust Narration: Uruguay's Memorial del Holocausto del Pueblo Judío," studies public space and Jewish memory in Latin America, and in this essay she especially studies the Memorial del Holocausto in Montevideo presenting pictures and detailed observation on how each nation depicts the catastrophe according to its needs, myths, and history.

Chapter eleven brings "Singing Social Change: Nostalgic Memory and the Struggle of Belonging in a Buenos Aires Yiddish Chorus" by Natasha Zaretsky. Every Monday morning for over ten years, the authors tells us, Argentines citizens gathered in Plaza Lavalle in Buenos Aires to remember the AMIA attack that killed eighty-five people in 1994. One of these groups, the *Memoria Activa*, began to hold weekly protests demanding justice and mourning the victims. One specific morning in August of 2005, Reizl Sztarker spoke to the crowd about a Yiddish song. Zaretsky reflects on what the Yiddish song has to do with justice in Argentina; she studies how the use of Yiddish is closely related to political activism, citizenship, and a sense of Jewish and Argentine identity for these individuals. The choral director Sztarker invites people to reflect on how Yiddish music and nostalgic memory can become spaces of social change. In her article, Zaretsky examines this Yiddish chorus as a different cultural



space from which a community expresses its reactions and feelings to destruction.

The last chapter, Judah M. Cohen's "The Ethnic Dilemmas of Latin American Jewry," serves to masterfully close the book, complementing the previous chapters and the original idea of Lesser and Rein to review and expand the scholarship in the field. Cohen starts by giving some examples of Jewish expression in music, television, and art in Israel and the United States, by artists who credit parts of Latin America as a basis for their ethnic sounds and representations, promoting "the *image* of Judeo- or Israelo-Latinidad in markets where such perceptions indicate difference, and sometimes exoticism" (268). Cohen closes with observations on issues of ethnicity and proposes central questions for the future of Jewish-Latin American studies. This is a valuable collection of essays written by highly qualified scholars, achieving brilliantly the objectives proposed by the editors.

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MEXICAN MOSAIC: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEXICO. By Jürgen Buchenau. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2008, p. 164, \$16.95.

For a number of reasons, Jürgen Buchenau's *Mexican Mosaic* is the most useful textbook that I have assigned in the past decade when teaching the history of Mexico. Although instructors look for a variety of things when selecting a main text, most expect it to be readable and to facilitate learning. The book's low price helps to ensure that students will buy it, and its brevity increases the likelihood that they will read all of it. Because many general survey texts on Mexico range from four to eight hundred pages, undergraduates are often overwhelmed by their length and the amount of material. As a result, they sometimes ignore the text outright or struggle to identify what is relevant within it. Such long works can also restrict the instructor's hand, since parts may not be assigned or fewer non-textbook readings may be used in the course. None of these problems arise with Buchenau's book.

Since most students who read this text are likely new to Mexican history, to improve their comprehension Buchenau smartly begins his account with a broad and thorough introduction that highlights the country's geography, topography, regions, ethnic populations, major industries, micro and macro economies, foreign relations, wars fought (both domestic and foreign), national identity, popular culture, and national politics. To facilitate learning, a timeline of major events since 200 BCE, a glossary of Spanish terms, maps, photographs, and a bibliographical essay are included. The sixteen pages of photos can stimulate class discussion; they also illustrate the extremes of Mexican society since they include, among other

