

Introduction

In 1929, four years before Hitler would assume the chancellorship of Germany, Siddy Wronsky, a founding figure in German social work and leading Jewish social reformer, warned her co-religionists of the impending catastrophe facing German Jewry. In her opening remarks at a conference on Jewish population policy, her words bore a prophetic tone, warning of the increasingly acute “danger of extermination or atrophy of those already born and yet unborn.”¹ Rather than predicting the extermination of the Jews at the hands of a genocidal regime, however, Wronsky aimed at drawing attention to the wounds of the Jewish social body inflicted by the twin processes of modernization and assimilation and the broader social and economic crises of the Weimar Republic. Wronsky urged Jewish leaders to tend the Jewish population as the body of a people, whose “life-germ” was mortally threatened by the “unhealthy” social, political, and economic conditions of the postwar era.²

Neither Wronsky’s sense of urgency nor her physiological metaphors were unique to German Jews. She relied on a discourse that took shape during the nineteenth century as European social thinkers had created a biological vocabulary to address the nation’s demographic, social, and moral concerns. The alchemy of World War I, however, changed what had previously been seen as a source of general concern into a full-blown historical crisis. Across the continent, the war had decimated the adult male population, subjected extensive sectors of the home front population to severe malnutrition, and paralyzed already declining fertility rates. The massive displacement and disillusionment of the postwar period created a widespread sense of popular disorientation.

By conceptualizing the nation as an organic bodily entity, social thinkers created an image that could look the immediate catastrophe in the face at the same time that it provided a diagnosis for recovery.

In Germany, too, what observers had once viewed as the social pathologies of prewar society, were amplified by the devastating impact of the war. The wrenching disruptions of family life, a continuing decline in fertility rates, a swelling population of war orphans, and a rising rate of juvenile delinquency led many Germans to take these as symptoms indicative of a crisis of biological and social reproduction. Yet even as the Weimar Republic was born amid the catastrophe of German defeat, the ensuing social and political crises opened up the way for imaginative and far-reaching interventions into German social life. Accordingly, the end of the war signaled not only collapse but also a new beginning and presented social reformers, physicians, and feminists with an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine and reconstruct the German national body (*Volkskörper*). Indeed, this pairing of “crisis and renovation,”³ the anticipation of impending doom accompanied by ambitious designs for radical renewal, constitutes the truly unique “paradox of Weimar.”⁴

This book is about the Weimar Jewish paradox. It traces how social workers and physicians, lay people and religious leaders transformed the postwar Jewish crisis into an opportunity for Jewish revitalization. In the overlapping realms of family, welfare, and reproduction, Jewish reformers saw not only the threat of social disorder and potentially dangerous instability but also the prospect for enlisting those very institutions in the drive to reconstitute a strengthened and more vibrant Jewish population. Within the framework of the larger public debate on gender roles, reproduction, work, and the family, Jewish social reformers placed the bodies of biologically and economically unproductive Jews, once on the margins of Jewish society, at the very center of the project of rejuvenating German Jewry. In their efforts to strengthen the social body while simultaneously providing support to a whole new class of Jews in need, Weimar Jews undertook something that was more than simply an expansive program of social relief. Their attempts to remake the social represented an act of self-defense not, as the term is normally used, in reaction to anti-Semitism but in the face of what they understood to be the modern plagues of individualism, infertility, and degeneration.

With their recasting of this crisis as a social illness, Jewish social reformers also set in place their prescribed course of action: the introduction of modern social policy interventions and a more intensive regulation of social life. A scientific emphasis and rationalizing approach, combined with an unbounded sense of possibility, led Jewish communal leaders and social experts to pathologize the social and reproductive behaviors of men and—to a much greater extent—women in ways that construed the Jewish social body as an organism in significant need of a new and decisive regime of treatment. As such, they reclassified individual behaviors and even attitudes—the choice of marriage partners, changing views of sexuality, women’s employment, or young men’s lack of it—in terms of the risk they posed to the health and stability of the entire organism. Jewish social experts and lay leaders thus sought to strengthen and normalize the population in ways that would maximize its productivity in the service of both the Jewish community and the German nation. Put in Foucauldian terms, Jewish leaders were acting on the biopolitical imperative through promoting the health, reproduction, and welfare of the Jewish population.⁵

While Wronsky approached the task of improving the Jewish population as a Zionist, Weimar Jews held competing visions for potential social remedies as well as the ultimate appearance of a reinvigorated Jewish community. Would a revitalized Jewish entity in Germany resemble a densely textured ethnic component of the German nation or its own nation? Would it embody an expansion of Liberal Jewish religious values or create an altogether new kind of Jew?⁶ For their part, nonorthodox and non-Zionist Liberal Jews regularly employed such terms as *Gemeinschaft*, which by the 1920s already implied a community bound by organic ties. Moving away from a notion of the Jewish collectivity defined strictly in the liberal sense of an assemblage of autonomous individual citizens, Liberal Jews increasingly invoked the notions of the community in its totality (*Gesamtheit*, *Volksganze*) bound by fate (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*). By contrast, but in some respects parallel to Liberal Jews, Zionists tended to refer to their ideal Jewish community in terms that directly paralleled the German national ideal of “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) or “national body” (*Volkskörper*).

Though differences between Zionist and non-Zionist visions of the Jewish future certainly remained, these new articulations of community

nevertheless bore a surprising degree of similarity. To capture this commonality, I use the term *social body* to include the variety of visions Jews held for a new kind of community that bound the individual body in dynamic relation with a larger social one. Through organic metaphors, reformers across the religious divide understood a society that functioned as a social organism, with needs and interests that extended well beyond those of the atomized individual.⁷ Equally important, they linked the health of the individual body with that of the Jewish community. Thus, in contrast to what one historian of Weimar Jews has labeled the “divisive landscape of German Jewry,” the notion of a Jewish social body calls attention to a heretofore neglected dimension of German-Jewish self-perception: that among a degree of ideological disunity, there existed an overarching unity of intent not merely to relieve social distress but to re-order Jewish society and manage it as a coherent whole.⁸

The idea of a Jewish social body that was subject to intervention and treatment was taken directly from social and medical discourses about the health of the nation. Against this background, this book shows how Jews, many of whom had gained knowledge and expertise as professionals in the fields of social welfare and medicine, mobilized discourses devised to strengthen the German nation on behalf of the Jewish community. What is particularly striking in this regard is that social reformers’ impulse for a new expression of Jewish particularism did not depend on the surrender of their Germanness. Instead, through a dialectical dynamic of Jewish assimilation, Weimar Jews forged a new notion of Jewish difference out of the raw materials of German culture. Thus, rather than viewing assimilation as an appropriation of external elements to some kind of essential Jewish culture, Jews also expressed their uniqueness “in an idiom always acquired from their environment,” as Amos Funkenstein has argued.⁹ Like other Germans, Jews who worked in the social and medical professions viewed the strengthening of the family, the attempt to increase reproduction, the need for expanding welfare, and the rehabilitation of orphaned and delinquent youth as a crucial means of redeeming the German nation and restoring its national spirit. But in this process, self-identified Jews, who were deeply rooted in non-Jewish middle-class German society and culture and saw themselves as fully “German,” utilized the ideas and methods of contemporary social pol-

itics as a means of significantly expanding the scope, authority, and distinctiveness of the Jewish community. Thus, we see in this period not only the evolution of “Germans into Nazis,” to use Peter Fritzsche’s notable formulation, but a simultaneous development of Germans into Jews.¹⁰

This dynamic of dialectical assimilation led Jewish social reformers, together with lay people, to work toward the creation of an increasingly separate sphere of Jewish social, philanthropic, and educational engagement, even as these Jewish interpretations in some ways disrupted the promotion of a specifically German national solidarity and social cohesion that discourses about national health were intended to produce. Accordingly, Jewish medical and social welfare experts transformed notions of the ideal German family, healthy bodily and reproductive practices, and the relationship of these practices to the shaping of community while subverting their integrative function. I argue that in doing so, they reinforced the demarcation of the Jewish people as a social entity distinct from the larger German polity both on the level of the individual embodied Jewish subject and on the level of an incarnation of a new Jewish body politic within the boundaries of the state itself.

In its concern with the question of assimilation, this work builds on a body of literature that has substantially reassessed older notions of assimilation by examining the emergence of what the Zionist leader Kurt Blumenfeld first identified as a post-assimilation Jewish identity.¹¹ Until fairly recently, the concept of assimilation in Jewish historiography had become nearly synonymous with a unilinear process of identity loss. Because earlier histories of Weimar Jewry tended to emphasize anti-Semitism and communal dissolution as a prelude to the Final Solution, Weimar had assumed a generally negative image in Jewish historiography.¹² In this once-dominant historical narrative, Weimar symbolized the last full bloom of a decadent assimilationism before German Jewish history was to wither and die. Read often through the lens of 1933, Weimar becomes the final denouement at the end of a one-way trajectory of assimilation that began with Emancipation, peaked in Weimar, and was tragically repudiated with National Socialism.

More recent works in Jewish historiography have thus sought to avoid the pitfalls of hindsight by attempting to consider Weimar on its own

terms. Without denying the existence of either anti-Semitism or internal disintegrative trends such as disassociation from the community, intermarriage, and conversion, historians have nonetheless begun to uncover and document a strong impulse for the renewal of community, including perhaps most significantly what Michael Brenner has called a renaissance of Jewish culture.¹³ But this newer literature on the Weimar Republic has still largely overlooked Jewish activities taking place outside the purview of politics, religion, and culture as they have been traditionally defined.¹⁴ Given the remarkable productivity of the Jewish social realm, this neglect is particularly unfortunate. Within the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic, the Jewish community created a stunning array of welfare programs and social institutions addressed to the needs of nearly every stage of life. Founding innovative national organizations, convening conferences, and generating scientific studies, Weimar Jews significantly expanded the network of welfare provision and opportunities for social intervention carried out by representatives of both state and community. While for some Jews, the attraction to modern social work reflected a more secular Jewish undertaking, for others, social work remained informed by religious commitments yet refocused attention on the bonds of Jewish ethnic attachment.¹⁵ In both cases, the pragmatism of the social sphere by no means desacralized the task at hand. Central to this book's argument is that an engagement in improving, normalizing, and regulating the social sphere not only helped to bring a unity of purpose to the community but also constituted a new kind of holy work for Weimar Jews.¹⁶

Despite this shift away from the dominant focus on "high culture" and intellectual production, a sustained analysis of Jewish communal activity in the social realm still calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between Jewish self-perception, liberalism, and *Bildung*. George Mosse's argument that *Bildung*—usually translated as self-education or self-cultivation—had become the religion of newly emancipated German Jews was critical for refocusing as well as complicating our understanding of assimilation and identity formation. Because Jewish Emancipation coincided with the period of the German Enlightenment, Mosse demonstrated how Jews infused their Jewish frameworks with the substance of (liberal) German culture. Following Mosse, by the time of the Weimar

Republic, German Jewry's hold on the classical Enlightenment ideals associated with *Bildung* was far firmer than the rest of German society: while Christian Germany slid into irrationalism and xenophobia, Weimar Jews still held on to nineteenth-century notions of liberalism. As a community of Jews "beyond Judaism," Weimar Jews had become the "sole custodians of Humboldt's ideal of *Bildung*."¹⁷

The importance of Mosse's thesis for German-Jewish history is evident in the number of productive revisions that have been subsequently introduced by other scholars.¹⁸ *Germans into Jews* reconsiders Mosse's rather dichotomous conceptualization of Weimar's anachronistic, though in his view highly desirable, Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* (cultivated bourgeoisie) on the one hand and Romantic counterreactions to liberal ideals, including Zionism and the Jewish youth movement, on the other.¹⁹ In contrast to these two poles, the Jews discussed in this study forged a synthesis of Jewishness and Germanness that neither abandoned reason and science nor lost an optimistic faith in human nature. In fact, it drew from another body of liberal social thought that included the disciplines related to social reform that were gaining influence as they became allied with, and institutionalized by, the welfare state. Hence, there was another face of liberalism in the Weimar Republic that allowed Jews to remain true to their liberal ideals even as their version of liberalism drew from discourses of national improvement and stressed the collective over the individual and the organic *Gemeinschaft* over the mechanistic ties characteristic of modernity. Not only Zionists, as is normally assumed, but increasingly also Liberal and religious Jews held visions of a new Jewish social body that was propelled by a sense of both cultural pessimism and utopian optimism. Thus, unlike Mosse's *Bildungsbürgertum*, who reputedly sought to transcend all differences in nationality and religion, these Jews consciously sought to reassert a Jewish ethnic particularism within the framework of the Weimar welfare state.

The underexamined spheres of family, welfare, and reproduction also bring into focus the important gender dimensions of this study. Consistent with contemporary feminist notions of "social motherhood," middle-class Jewish women employed the idea of maternalism to expand their role in the Jewish public sphere through the professionalization of social work. As the primary agents of social work, women became

key practitioners in the increasingly valued arena of social policy by bringing their “motherly” qualities to bear upon the problems of other families within the Jewish community and the nation as a whole. This expanded the “women’s sphere” to include the elimination of social ills and the revitalization of the Jewish social body; Jewish women were thus assigned—but also took upon themselves—a set of social duties that combined biological and social motherhood. Thus, to the degree that the social sphere had become an increasingly important arena for the Jewish social and religious engagement during the Weimar Republic, this new sphere was founded on a clear gendered division of private and public labor. The merging of the tasks of social and biological motherhood placed women at the very center of the postwar project of remaking both the German nation and the Jewish community.²⁰

In addition to reassessing the nature of assimilation from the vantage point of the social realm, this work also seeks to redress the invisibility of German Jews as a collectivity in German historiography. That historians of Germany have underplayed Jewish difference should hardly be surprising since the weight of German history virtually crushes any notion of “Jewish difference.” The Nazi policy of defining the Jewishness of its victims without regard to their own sense of identity has made scholars wary of attributing Jewish identities to historical actors. As a consequence, however, anti-Semitism became the prime signifier of Jewish “difference” within narratives of German history. Despite the valuable contribution of a significant body of literature on anti-Semitism, we know much less about the social processes by which Jews negotiated the challenge of trying to remain at once fully German and deeply Jewish. Jews are conspicuously absent, for example, in the recent German literature on gender, the body, and the Weimar welfare state, surfacing first, it seems, as the post-1933 victims of Nazi racial policy.²¹ In the otherwise rich and nuanced discussions of Weimar social policy, a highly visible and conflict-ridden sector of Weimar political and social life in which Jews played an active role, historians have relegated Jewish welfare work to the margins. Though Jews as individuals may be readily included in accounts of the period, Jewish collective existence is all but excluded from the larger narratives of postwar Germany. The end result is that in Weimar scholarship, at least within the broad domain of social policy, Jews have

achieved the mythic assimilation that they never fully attained during the Weimar period.

Because of the relative invisibility of the Jewish community within recent Weimar histories, the absence of Jews *as Jews* adds to the urgency of reintegrating Jews as a collectivity into German history. The contributions of such prominent German-Jewish figures in Weimar social work, sex reform, and social hygiene as Sidy Wronsky, Felix Theilhaber, Gustav Tugendreich, and Henriette Fürth are well known, but their rendering of German social policy within a specifically Jewish sphere of social life produced new and particularistic meanings that have yet to be explored.²² By 1933, of course, Jews had become marginalized by the Nazi state and were the targets of combined racial and social policies that originated in the late nineteenth century. But for the period before the Nazis came to power, this work restores Jews to their position as agents in German history and not simply as victims. The grand plans and visions for the social and biological regeneration of Jewish society proposed by these otherwise well-known figures does not, then, merely comprise a chapter in the history of Weimar Jews but belongs within the larger history of *German* social welfare and social policy.

Biopolitics and the Social

Just as this study of Weimar Jews is situated within both German and Jewish historiographies, it also forms part of a growing corpus of work that has focused on the social as a concept and object of science in European history. Appearing in the early nineteenth century with the first dislocations of the modern industrial economy, the “social” represented an inherently problematic realm, populated by collectivities—among them, women, adolescents, and workers—that posed a disturbance to the existing bourgeois order.²³ In Germany, the social quickly emerged as the locus for middle-class anxieties over poverty and its manifestations in the form of crime, poor sanitation, youth delinquency, family dissolution, and the immorality that was believed to be associated with these.

Although there have certainly been social and economic upheavals prior to the modern period, the “social,” as it was invoked in the

nineteenth century, implied a state of enduring crisis.²⁴ In its very definition, the social came to designate, according to Gilles Deleuze, “a new terrain, a ‘particular sector’ in which, in the course of the nineteenth century, a wide variety of problems came to be grouped together, a ‘sector’ comprising specific institutions and an entire body of qualified personnel.”²⁵ The social realm was thus defined as much by crises as it was by the ability of experts to design far-reaching solutions to address them. In this connection, Foucault’s theory of governmentality or biopolitics provided a crucial spur for the production of scholarly works examining the social realm. *Biopolitics* refers to the entire sphere of activity devoted to promoting the health, reproduction, and welfare of the population. As many works since Foucault have come to demonstrate, the state sought to manage the social through “the politics of life” as a way to maximize the strength and efficiency of the population.²⁶ The social realm thus became the locus for monitoring the physical and social health of the population and, as a result, the chief site for biopolitical interventions.

Although many Jewish histories have dealt in one way or another with topics that are encompassed by biopolitics and the social—poverty, economics, welfare, reproduction, assimilation, and the family—historians have often neglected to consider the “social” and the surrounding discourses as a distinctly modern construct embedded with pessimistic diagnoses of disorder and prescriptions for social intervention. In place of historicization, many scholars have instead uncritically accepted the trope of decline and the accompanying portraits of social and demographic problems as “actual” problems to be either confirmed or rejected rather than as new conceptualizations of modern society elaborated by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jews. Even today, some scholars continue to draw upon the same arguments that Jewish communal leaders formulated over a century ago, either basing their research on statistics produced in the nineteenth century or relying on similar uses of statistics to “prove” how dire the circumstances of modern Jewry have become. I certainly do not mean to argue that all constructions of social problems, statistics, or the social realities derived from them have no meaning but rather that they did, in fact, have specific meanings, as new forms of knowledge that were produced at a particular historical moment.²⁷ A key aim of this work, therefore, is to historicize assumptions

about the social and social decline that were shared by Weimar Jews and non-Jews across the political and social spectrum, to illustrate the degree to which crisis is indeed in the eye of the beholder.²⁸

It is the Jewish engagement with constructing a specifically Jewish social realm in parallel with the German one that is of greatest interest in the larger context of biopolitics and the social in Germany. For although biopolitics is fundamentally bound up with the development of the modern state, this study explores how a minority group within such a state utilized biopolitical discourses and institutions to execute the state's work yet, at the same time, distinguished itself from the rest of the population. At one level, Jewish biopolitical discourses and practices mirrored the actions of the state, where Jewish experts utilized a variety of sciences to help ensure the long-term interests of the state through stabilizing their community. Hence, biopolitics exercises its coercive dimension at the hands of Jewish reformers, who attempted to mold human material by resocializing deviant youth, raising Jewish women's fertility, and changing Jewish occupational and marriage patterns. It is also important, however, to recognize the noncoercive side of biopolitics, to consider, for example, those practices and discourses that social actors drew upon because they offered the very real possibility for social relief and material improvement.²⁹

But Jewish communal leaders and social workers did not intervene in the social sphere solely on the state's behalf; they were also pursuing an agenda independent of it. Thus, at the broadest level, we may think about Jewish biopolitics as an important strategy employed by Weimar Jews to address the modern concern with sustaining the Jews as a viable and distinct group. Indeed, if biopolitics represents one of the fundamental categories by which scholars now understand modernity, as Edward Dickinson has suggested, then we can discern from the case of Weimar Jews how biopolitics and the social have become central to the shaping of Jewish modernity.³⁰

A reconsideration of German biopolitics that renders Jews its agents, and not only its victims, also addresses the scholarship that concerns the relationship between the fractured Weimar democracy and the ascent of the Nazis. Much of the recent literature on welfare, family, and reproductive policy during the Weimar Republic has sought to identify the

intellectual and institutional continuities between Weimar social policy and Nazi racial policies. In this context, the work of Detlev Peukert was centrally important in setting the stage for this focus.³¹ Peukert's examination of youth welfare policy during the Weimar Republic shows that the utopian plans of youth welfare experts to reform wayward youth through an ambitious application of new social pedagogical methods gave way, at the end of the 1920s, to increasing pessimism about the possibility of reform. Coinciding with the period of rationing and want accompanying the Great Depression, the ambition to remake youth led to prioritizing those seen as most worthy of the investment of resources and paved the way for the exclusion—and eventual murder—of entire subgroups of the population.³² Increasingly, however, historians have begun to challenge the assumption of such direct lines of continuity from Weimar to Hitler, insisting on the importance of distinguishing ruptures as much as continuities and demonstrating the crucial differences between liberal and conservative uses of social, racial, and eugenic discourses and practices.³³ Incorporating some of the specifically Jewish uses of biopolitics brings another voice to this discussion, reinforcing the need for the construction of a layered and nuanced narrative of the relationship between Weimar racial and social policy and its relationship to Nazism.

The book begins by examining how the “crisis of the family,” as it was called in the 1920s, was closely bound up with concerns for the health of the nation. The absence of fathers during the war, challenges posed by the “New Woman,” generational conflict, and what was called the “wilding of youth” led observers to conclude that the strength and continuity of the family was seriously under threat. As the locus of biological and social reproduction, the family was held up as the ultimate basis for national fitness. In accordance with the prevalent biological metaphor of the family as the “cell of the nation,” many Weimar Jews drew a parallel conclusion that the Jewish family was the foundational unit of the Jewish people. Chapter 1 analyzes how Jews reworked the widely accepted notion of a postwar crisis of the family to reflect their concerns about the continued strength and viability of the Jewish community. Like other Germans, Jews viewed their efforts at strengthening the family as a contribution to German national regeneration, but they also considered the