

Moritz Lazarus: A Marginal Man in the Centre of German Society

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ABSTRACT

German-Jewish philosopher Moritz Lazarus and his work are an example of how someone could live at the centre of society and still be marginalised, how living at the margins can shape the theoretic reflection on society, and at the same time how this theory can then become a part of political and social struggles to overcome marginality. He envisioned a social theory that included the idea of ‘objective spirit’, which was meant as the whole world of objective, human-made and historically emerged ideas, traditions, institutions and things – what we today would describe as culture. His ideas about group membership and society were pluralistic at best, if not constructionist: he rejected the idea that belonging to a collective would be determined by language, descent, ‘race’ or place. For him, it was the subjective act of taking part, not external traits that determined belonging. Lazarus’s ideas were accepted, absorbed selectively or contested, but, in the end, the ambivalence of their perception stems from the modernity of his questions and conclusions. Like many German Jews of this time, and according to his own ideas of belonging to a collective, Lazarus did not consider himself a stranger in Germany at all. Jews like Lazarus were actively co-constructing the national project – and in many cases without being questioned. He was a prominent representative of this era of national, liberal and idealist optimism that ended around 1879, when the pluralist liberal tradition was in less demand and modern antisemitism spread throughout academia and the educated public. Lazarus’s theory of culture based on and developed through plurality was rediscovered in the 1980s, and in many respects it is still useful as a descriptive as well as a normative tool to engage with the modern situation, owing to his own position at the centre and the margins.

Keywords: Germany, liberalism, idealism, antisemitism, German-Jewish history

LIVING IN THE CENTRE

If you speak about the centre of Germany around the end of the 19th century, you probably provoke the imagination of a map of historical Berlin. This was where the Empire was governed from since 1871. It was the capital of the Empire’s most important partial state, Prussia, and also the rapidly growing city many people from all the Prussian provinces were moving to. One of those migrants was a young Jewish intellectual from the small town of Filehne in the province of Posen: Moritz Lazarus. And it was right in the centre of this Prussian and later German capital where he took up residence, soon after he had finished his studies and married Sarah Lebenheim. Her dowry and inheritance finally brought financial security into the life of the rather poor second son of a Talmud scholar. He could not only take up his project to write a psychology of everyday phenomena, but the two of them could also now afford an apartment at *Königsplatz*. Here, in the middle of today’s governmental quarter, between Chancellery and *Brandenburger Tor*, near the Swiss embassy, in the 1860s you would find a wide square, crowned by the *Siegesänne* with the golden Victoria statue on top, bounded in the west by Kroll’s famous entertainment establishment and Palais Raczinsky in the east – which only two decades later would be replaced by the

monumental new *Reichstag* building. From here, Lazarus could walk to most of the locations of his work and public events, like the Prussian War Academy, the Royal Library, the university, or the *Singakademie*.

My interest in this figure, who arrived in Berlin as a poor Jewish student and left it decades later as a famous and well-connected scholar, goes back to my studies in the philosophy of culture when philosopher Klaus Christian Köhnke introduced me to a fascinating early theory of culture. It was called *Völkerpsychologie* and devised by a man of the name M. Lazarus. You can translate the term for this discipline as psychology of peoples, social psychology, or proto-sociology, but none of these would grasp it fully (cf. Bunzl, 2003; Greenwood, 2003; Berg, 2015; Berek, 2018; Reiners, 2020).

What was so fascinating about it? First, despite its rather ornate language, it speaks to the present reader who is interested in overarching perspectives on society, its self-understanding and the way knowledge is flowing through it. What Lazarus devised in the 1850s and 60s has become a basic cornerstone of today's social sciences and humanities. He formulated theories of the relation between the individual and society, between the subjects and their social circles as well as their relation to the world of the 'objective spirit'. And 'objective spirit' here was not meant to be a metaphysical concept in a Hegelian sense. Lazarus meant the whole world of objective, human-made and historically emerged ideas, traditions, institutions and things – what we today would describe as culture in its broad sense. In addition, his ideas about group membership and society are pluralistic at best, if not constructionist. He rejected the idea that belonging to a collective would be determined by language, descent, 'race' or place. For him, it was the *subjective act* of taking part, not external traits that determined belonging. To put it how he phrased it in his introduction to *Völkerpsychologie* from 1860:

“A people is a number of humans who regard themselves as one people, count themselves as one people. (...) People is the spiritual product of the subjects who belong to it; they are not a people, they just produce it permanently.” (Lazarus and Steinthal, 1860: 35–36)¹

The longer I worked with these texts by Lazarus, the more I wondered why he and the *Völkerpsychologie* seemed to be mostly forgotten in the disciplines that owe so much to him, mostly so psychology, sociology and philosophy. This was especially interesting because in his time Lazarus was a prominent figure and the *Völkerpsychologie* a well-known part of the contemporary philosophical and psychological debates in academia and society. So my question was: Who *did* take on *Völkerpsychologie* in the 19th century, and how and why? And why had it been forgotten so quickly at the beginning of the 20th century? There seemed to be a contradiction between prominence and exclusion, centre and margin, impact and forgetting, success and failure. This led me to my research on the perception of the work and public presence of Lazarus.²

BECOMING FAMOUS: A BIOGRAPHY OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Before I turn to some findings from this research, I have to introduce you to M. Lazarus. He was born as Moshe in 1824 into a rather poor but well-educated Jewish family in the small town of Filehne in the Prussian province of Posen. Moritz, as he called himself after the naturalisation, after a short time as an apprentice, rejected his father's wish to become a merchant. Instead, he moved to Braunschweig to finish the German *Gymnasium* and in 1846 started to study at Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität— philosophy and psychology, history, language and natural sciences like physics, botany and physiology (Leicht, 1912: 44; N. Lazarus, 1913; Leicht, 1924; Belke, 1971). During the revolutionary events of 1848, he was one of the editors of the journal of Berlin's citizen militia where he wrote for the political feuilleton (Berek, 2020: 51–54, 67–69). Shortly after having finished his dissertation on aesthetic education, he published his first book, *Die Sittliche Berechtigung Preußens in Deutschland* (Prussia's moral entitlement in Germany: Lazarus, 1850). It was a historical, ethical and political essay in favour of a Prussian leadership in the unification of Germany to come. Soon followed the first volume of his main work, *Das Leben der Seele*, (The Life of the Soul: Lazarus, 1856), a collection of psychological and philosophical essays, which laid the foundation for his mainstream fame but also for *Völkerpsychologie* and his academic career.

This started his ascent in German society. The second half of the 19th century was his time. Lazarus became a well-known person in many ways, not only as a popular philosopher and professor who had founded *Völkerpsychologie*. He also became a representative of liberal German Jewry when he co-organised and presided over the reform synods in Leipzig in 1869 and Augsburg in 1871. When antisemitism was introduced to universities and spread throughout the educated bourgeois milieu by the infamous tractate of Heinrich von Treitschke (1879, cf. Krieger, 2003), Lazarus was one of the first who reacted in public and from then on fought bourgeois and academic antisemitism (Lazarus, 1880). He was extremely well-connected to Berlin's and Germany's upper

¹ All translations from German by the author, except marked otherwise.

² This research has been made possible through funding by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

bourgeois society, from writers like Paul Heyse, Theodor Fontane and Berthold Auerbach, artists like Clara Schumann, scholars like Wilhelm Dilthey or Georg Simmel, to politicians like Eduard Lasker, top-ranking army officers—or members of the Prussian court like Friedrich III, the 99-day-emperor. The salon of Moritz and Sara Lazarus has been described by contemporaries as one of the last great salons of Old Berlin (Weisstein, 1903).³

His career was one of those successful examples of Jewish Emancipation in the second half of the 19th century (cf. Sieg, 1996). His philosophical and psychological contributions were recognised in academic as well as public discourse and led to a professorship in Switzerland in 1860: the University of Bern established the chair for Psychology and *Völkerpsychologie* for him – the first-ever chair for psychology (Heller, 1986: 2). After only a few years, he was even elected dean of the faculty of philosophy and rector of the university. He was invited to hold public lectures and discussed the reform of the Swiss education system with the officials (N. Lazarus, 1910). At the same time, he maintained his social life in Berlin, for instance in literary circles like the *Rittli*, and even ran real estate businesses in Leipzig, where he purchased a manor in the outskirts. Only six years after his appointment to Bern, however, he returned to Berlin and started to teach as a professor at the Prussian War Academy, where he bore responsibility for the philosophical education of the officers. But he lost this position again due to its antisemitic director. In contrast to Switzerland, German universities refused to accept Lazarus as a full professor at any point during his life. Similar to many other Jews, he was limited to the post of honorary professorship (cf. Rürup and Nipperdey, 1975; Kampe, 1987; Pawliczek, 2011). Accordingly, Lazarus taught psychology and *Völkerpsychologie* at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität of Berlin from 1873, after the minister of culture had awarded him an honorary, unpaid professorship at the faculty of philosophy – against the will of the members of the faculty. After many years as an unpaid professor and top-level functionary in multiple religious and charity bodies, but also after his businesses had mostly failed (as many did during the crises following the *Gründerzeit* boom), he retired in 1896 to Meran in Tyrol and also sold his manor in Leipzig. In Meran, he wrote his late work, *The Ethics of Judaism* which appeared in two volumes (Lazarus, 1898, 1911).⁴ Lazarus died in 1903.

BEING MARGINAL AT THE CENTRE OF SOCIETY

Like Georg Simmel's famous figure of the stranger (1971 [1908]), or like Robert E. Park's marginal person (1928; cf. also Hjortshøj, 2021), Lazarus lived in several cultures at the same time. And he was aware of this position in between. It allowed him a differentiated, distanced but also creative perspective on the material and meaning structures of his society. Even in his hometown in the province of Posen, he observed different ethnic, religious and language groups living together: Catholic Poles as well as German-speaking Protestants and Jews. Keeping his extensive Jewish religious knowledge, he fully acquired German classical education.

Admittedly, this hybridity of belonging to different worlds at the same time was not unproblematic for Lazarus. For instance, as a pupil of the Gymnasium, he struggled a lot to reconcile the traditional religious world he was brought up in and the intellectual realms of the Graeco-Roman classics he studied. His name is also quite telling. On almost every occasion he simply called himself 'Lazarus' or 'M. Lazarus'. Almost all the books and articles published in his lifetime appeared under this abbreviation. He even signed almost all of his letters like this. It was as if he wanted to avoid fully embracing the 'Moritz' and letting go of the 'Moshe'.

Lazarus was, however, no stranger in the eyes of his contemporaries. He was not the kind of foreigner who did not belong to the collective, as described in Simmel's conception. In his famous excursus on the stranger, Simmel had already distanced himself from the older understanding of the stranger as the "wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow" with his description of the "person who comes today and stays tomorrow." For him, the existence of the stranger was nothing but "a specific form of interaction", and even more: "naturally a very positive relation" (Simmel, 1908: 509).⁵ The stranger, in this understanding, was part of the community, one that incorporated the simultaneity of closeness and distance. His attributes were flexibility, mobility, objectivity and freedom—traits that proved useful for both him and his community. But this positive description by the German sociologist of Jewish descent has to be put into its historical context. This context is already provided by Simmel himself through his references to the problematic relation between being Jewish and being or being made the stranger, or through his short remark about that other "kind of 'strangeness'" which "rejects the very commonness" between the stranger and the other members of the community (Simmel, 1908: 512; engl. Simmel, 1950: 407). Thus, Simmel's sociological conception of the stranger has to be understood as a "historical category", too (Köhnke, 2011). And in doing so, the difference to Lazarus's conception of belonging becomes clear. Simmel's positive description of the stranger also transports a somewhat apologetic hope that the position of the stranger as a part of the community can be legitimised even though the members of the collective that defines itself through the exclusion of the

³ Cf. for the biographical details Berek (2020).

⁴ Volume 1 has been translated to English by Henrietta Szold: Lazarus 1900-1901.

⁵ Translated from Kurt Wolff (Simmel, 1950: 402).

(defined) stranger have marked him as being foreign. Lazarus doubtlessly had experienced exclusion in German society, but Simmel had lived until 1918 and seen the further development and spread of modern essentialist antisemitism that evolved in the last decades of the 19th century. That could explain why, although he conceptualised the stranger as an organic part of the community, in the end, he rather pessimistically affirms the stranger's status as foreign. Lazarus's conception of society has no place for such a position of a stranger as being continuously foreign and less close to the collective than the 'autochthones'. In his ideal society, everybody who contributes to the community and counts himself to it, no matter his descent, in fact becomes an equal part of it. One could say that Lazarus, by way of more positive experiences, had developed a more optimistic conception of society—and, of course, interpreted his own situation in the same way.

Lazarus was thus definitely a member of German society. That is the signature of his time, the second half of the 19th century, between the successful Jewish emancipation and the rise of modern antisemitism. Although many non-Jews were already feeling uneasy about that change, bourgeois Jews like Lazarus could experience steep upward mobility and social success. Like many German Jews of this time, and according to his own ideas of belonging to a collective, Lazarus did not consider himself a stranger in Germany at all. In his activities in favour of the reform of Judaism and his fight against antisemitism, he was a typical representative of liberal German Jews who saw themselves not only primarily as Germans but were also convinced that religion should be a private matter, disconnected from state affairs. The fact that the '*Judenfrage*' (the Jewish question) had been raised in the first place by the promoter of academic antisemitism, Heinrich von Treitschke, and others in 1879, hit Lazarus not primarily as a Jew, but as a German first and foremost:

“(…) the mere fact that it is discussed is more than a danger, it is a deep suffering, it is a disgrace! We do not care what answer will be given to the Jewish question. The fact that the Jewish question exists is a heavy suffering for the Jewish community in Germany, but a more serious one for the German nation. Gentlemen, the worst thing for us German Jews, especially for those who contribute so much to German culture, is one thing: our pride is broken. How proud we were of this German national spirit!” (Lazarus, 1881: 121)

Beyond this perception, there was an understanding of the German nation as a universalist, plural, modern, ethical and civilised project. That is the liberal conception of the nation that, much like Lazarus, most German Jews had in mind when they wholeheartedly took part in the construction of Germany during the second half of the century. Even when the later development of German history proved them wrong in that expectation, this development was not a necessary one, and Imperial Germany was without a doubt also a Jewish-German endeavour. With the '*Judenfrage*', however, the nation would cancel its membership in the European civilisation, Lazarus stressed:

“(…) the Jewish question, when it is posed, is not a question of the Jews, but of the Germans. The question is whether they want to stay within the club of civilised nations of Europe or whether they want to leave and fall back into the barbarism of the Middle Ages. I therefore expect the fight against antisemitism not only from the candidate whom I elect; I expect it from the government and the parliament; I demand and expect it from every man who stands up for law and justice; I expect it from the genius of the German nation.” (Lazarus, 1887: 16)

There is no doubt that Lazarus considered himself a patriot. He was assured in his pluralistic experience by his own social ascent, but also by his friends and acquaintances in culture and politics, the military and the court. Thus, he was convinced that this German empire had achieved everything Liberals had hoped for and that because of this it was to be defended against its enemies. He even set this goal before the fight against antisemitism, when, in 1887, he supported the conservatives in the parliamentary struggle about the military budget:

“In this German Empire, the liberal parties should be the real conservative ones. For whose ideals are fulfilled in it? It certainly was not the aim of the highly conservative party to create a unified Germany, under Prussian leadership, an imperial parliament based on universal suffrage, a uniform law for all of Germany, the civil equality of all denominations, and so on. (...) But we, all of us Liberals, and liberal Jews most of all, should go with the government, should form its firm support, in order to secure the existence of our *ideals, which have been fulfilled in all their essentials*, and to make their further expansion possible. We must be most concerned with the strength of the Reich, the strength of the government, under whose leadership the German nation will achieve in one age what it has longed for in vain for centuries.” (Lazarus, 1887: 26)⁶

⁶ Emphasis in the original.

Lazarus had made his way to the centre of Imperial German society in the second half of the 19th century. He was one of those German Jews that actively took part in forming the German society that became a national state in 1871: as a professor and popular academic writer, as an official of German Jewry, especially in the struggle for reform and the fight against antisemitism, as a member of Berlin's cultural elite with close relations to writers like Theodor Fontane or Paul Heyse. His lectures drew large audiences. He presided over a number of associations, both Jewish and non-Jewish, from the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* to the *Deutsche Schiller-Stiftung*. Even if he stayed an outsider at the university, in the end, he had been a professor, dean and rector at several universities; and his social psychological ideas, his pluralist faith and his ideal-realist syntheses were widely known and met with much approval. At least temporarily. And he was looked upon favourably by the educated public. The capital's most influential newspapers like the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *Berliner Tageblatt* or the *National-Zeitung* have covered his career, his publications as well as his public appearances over decades. So one can confidently say that he was standing in the centre of German upper society.

An anecdote might underscore this. In the year 1884, the Schiller associations organised festivities all over Germany, celebrating the 125th birthday of the poet. Lazarus was giving the keynote at the corresponding event in Berlin. After the lecture, according to the story, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm—and later Emperor Friedrich III—approached Lazarus and told him: “My dear professor, you will always remain our flag-bearer of true idealism” (N. Lazarus and Leicht, 1906: 189).

MARGINALISING THE LIBERAL AND THE JEW

Which idealism is the Crown Prince referring to? The form and content of Lazarus's work were influenced by the universalist, humanist and optimistic spirit of a liberal intellectual tradition in 19th-century Germany. Lazarus stood for this liberal part of his generation as a person—with his national-liberal worldviews shaped by the values of enlightenment, with his non-polemical demeanour, with his refraining from party struggles, with his German-Jewish patriotism, and with his optimism about progress. He represented an ethically-idealist understanding of the civic culture-nation, the *Kulturnation*. And the Crown Prince was not only the hope of German Liberals.⁷ He also was a declared supporter of German Jewry against antisemitic exclusion.⁸

The terms idealism and liberalism I am talking about here refer to certain strands of both that were dominant in a bourgeois German-speaking educated public between the revolution of 1848 and the conservative turn in 1878.

This idealism was building more on Kant than on Hegel, which means giving ethics an important place within it and avoiding substantialising statements: both *a priori* (notion) and *a posteriori* (perception) of the given were the ground for experience. This idealism incorporated materialistic elements and sometimes was called *Idealrealismus* (ideal realism). Most importantly, idea and ideal converged in idealistic ethics. It was referring to the enlightenment ideals of education and reasonable individuals. It tried to harmonise the progress made in the natural sciences with the heritage of philosophy, instead of deepening the gap between objectivist materialism and radically subjectivistic and metaphysical idealism. The immortality of the ideas it referred to was not meant ontologically but purely culturally and based on history: ideas were human-made and lived through human history where they formed human cultures and histories. With this, Lazarus and the *Völkerpsychologie* were joining figures in German philosophy like Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, Carl Prantl, Friedrich Ueberweg, Jürgen Bona Meyer, Hermann von Helmholtz or Friedrich Albert Lange. This *Neukantianismus* movement, as Köhnke (1986) has analysed it, was in part reacting to developments towards replacing philosophy with positivistic sciences. Instead, it aimed at a new synthesis, at integrating the knowledge from those emerging sciences into philosophy, it demanded a “new acknowledgement of the empirical” (Köhnke, 1986: 39). But at the same time, this liberation of the philosophical disciplines from the metaphysical method had to be pushed through “against the strongest resistance” (ibid.: 88).⁹ Thus, the realistic idealism of Lazarus was no longer the old, speculative, metaphysical one but an idealism based on and controlled by empirical knowledge, particularly from psychology, linguistics and history. Rather than searching for the essence of the idea as such, it was looking for the empiric forms ideas have taken on throughout history and in different languages and cultures around the globe. Rather than speculating about the inner logic of ideas, it was interested in the functions they fulfilled in society, the laws or regularities they followed, how they spread, were used, changed, and influenced the thoughts and actions of living people. In this, he paid particular attention to the question of ethics as a system of ideal ideas that shape how people think they ought to act and how an ideal – i.e. just, emancipated and culturally advanced – society could be constructed.

⁷ Even if that hope might not be fully backed by Friedrich Wilhelm's real convictions or political potential, cf. Müller (2011).

⁸ For instance when he demonstratively visited a charity event at Berlin's New Synagogue in December 1879 and expressed his support for the Jews against anti-Jewish statements. Cf. Berek (2020: 406–407).

⁹ Translations by the author.

The liberalism I speak of is the one connected to the history of the *Nationalverein* and to names like Gabriel Riesser, Eduard Lasker and Ludwig Bamberger but also Rudolf von Bennigsen and Heinrich von Treitschke. It was a liberalism of notability and educated elites, building on enlightenment's high esteem of reason, individual autonomy and education, but also the individual's ethical responsibility. Regarding society, it stood for maximal economic freedom and minimal interference by the state, but also a constitutional system with equal rights for everybody – provided they were male, white and well-off, of course.

Lazarus not only embraced these trends in liberalism and idealism but extended them. In summary, his liberalism was pluralistic and universal, and his idealism was ethical and realistic. The concepts of society he developed and spread in his speeches, articles and books were pluralistic in their conviction that a nation would always consist of diverse groups. They were universalistic in their perspective on humanity as the highest goal (although restrained by European colonial racism and German patriotism). They expressed a deep national-liberal belief in the state and the nation as guarantors for equality, education and progress. Finally, they considered ideas as the main foundation for ethics and society. Unlike Kant, Lazarus merged ethical ideas with physical, mathematical and logical ones under an idea of mankind in interaction. In doing so, he was one of the first to envision a philosophy of culture (Köhnke, 1984, 1990b, 2003; Lessing, 1985; Graevenitz, 1999). Ideas for him, however, had no agency of their own in history but were always dependent on certain material conditions in order to be successful. Of course, he was not alone in that position. But looking at the perception of his work in newspapers and journals, it is clear that he was a prominent philosopher to represent it – and in some respects, he was first.

But after the end of the 1870s, this pluralist liberal tradition was in less demand. With the crisis of political liberalism, its universalist ethical idealism – and its flag-bearers – also became marginalised. German nation and Christian religion went other ways than that of plurality and equality. So, one could say that Lazarus became obsolete together with and as part of the liberal era.

At the same time, antisemitism started to play a role in the perception of his work. Up until 1879, the reviewers and commentators of works by Lazarus had been aware of his Jewishness but did not make it a problem, mostly not even a topic. Lazarus was the celebrated orator, popular philosopher and *Völkerpsychologe*. A telling example was his presence at the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the University of Vienna, where representatives of many European, mostly German-speaking, universities gathered. Newspapers from Bern to Berlin and from Augsburg to Vienna reported on the event as well as on the delegation of Lazarus as Bern's delegate. At the opening ceremony, as reported by several papers, Lazarus delivered a patriotic speech on how the German spirit (*deutscher Geist*) would be fragmented in the realms of politics but united in the academic sphere. When he concluded that science should fulfil its high duty to unite this German spirit for the good of Austria, Germany, science, humanity and ideality of the human spirit, the applause, the papers wrote, was rapturous and the host of the event, the university's rector Hyrtl, hugged and kissed Lazarus. His Jewishness was only mentioned in very few cases, and all without any judgement.¹⁰

This perception changed with Lazarus's presidency at the Jewish reform synods in 1869 and 1871. Now his Jewishness began to be mentioned regularly, but still in a non-judgemental way: He was now *also* the liberal Jew, next to his other roles and activities. But with the antisemitism debate after Heinrich von Treitschke's infamous text from 1879, his Jewishness became a problem in parts of the public. Now Lazarus was perceived *first and foremost* as the Jew, particularly since he had started to speak up publicly against the antisemitism of Treitschke & Co. Even the part of his oeuvre that had no connection to Judaism at all was now increasingly perceived as Jewish.

By the end of the century, only a few non-Jews continued to accept him as a full member of the educated upper society. In a letter to a friend, writer Theodor Fontane—his long-time colleague in the literature circle *Rüttli*—mentioned Lazarus's 70th birthday and reported that almost no non-Jews had appeared at the celebration. For Lazarus, according to Fontane, this had been a huge disappointment in comparison to the events three decades before at the 500-year anniversary of the University of Vienna:

“(…) there will be many tributes and yet, last of all, disappointments and bitterness. The whole event, according to this report, was [shaped by] *Judenmischpoke* [Jewish mishpocha].¹¹ The only two points of light are Bern and the Schönefeld pastor because they are Christian, German, and national. I believe that our friend was longing for this; he was sure of the Jews' approval, if only out of esprit de corps. 30 years ago, as he appeared in Vienna as Bern's representative, the rector of the university hugged him and kissed him in front of the assembled people. This kiss is missing today.” (Fontane in a letter to Zöllner, September 18, 1894; Fontane, 1987: 385–386)

¹⁰ For sources and interpretation of the events see Berek (2020: 189–199).

¹¹ Originally “Mischpoke”, this Yiddish term for family (networks) is mostly used pejoratively in German.

REFLECTING MARGINALITY: VÖLKERPSYCHOLOGIE

The liberal and pluralist views that shaped Lazarus's political interventions were firmly grounded in the social-psychological concepts of culture and society laid out in *Völkerpsychologie*. If a collective like the nation is based on the actions and self-understanding of its members instead of assumed objective characteristics then 1) membership is by definition open to newcomers like immigrants willing to integrate, and 2) nobody can be excluded on the basis of certain characteristics, like Jews for their religion. In his reaction to Treitschke, the printed lecture *Was heißt national?* (What does national mean?), Lazarus wrote:

“The concept of the nation is grounded on spiritual, historical constellations intervening into naturally given differences; and what makes a nation a nation are not objective conditions such as descent or language as such but the subjective ideas of the members of the nation who are joined together in considering themselves a nation.” (Lazarus, 1880: 64–65)¹²

This is a direct reference to the introduction to *Völkerpsychologie* from 1860 quoted in the beginning. The establishment of this discipline started with the observation that the term *Volkgeist* (national spirit) is often used in everyday life, but hardly dealt with in science, especially in philosophy. *Völkerpsychologie* is supposed to close this gap by psychologically recognising the ‘essence’ of the *Volkgeist* and searching for the laws

“according to which the inner, spiritual or ideal activity of a people (...) goes on (...) [Spirit is] the lawful movement and development of the inner activity” (Lazarus, 1851, quoted from the re-edition in Lazarus, 2003: 4).

It was an open attack on speculative philosophy when he asserted that the new science had to proceed from the empirical facts instead of assumed constructs and ready-made *a priori* categories. Much later, critics would attack *Völkerpsychologie* for having no object at all, because there was no substantial collective psyche, but Lazarus already anticipated and rejected this criticism here by pointing out that even individual psychology by no means had a substantial individual soul to analyse, but only psychic *processes* and *progresses*, i.e., the *laws* according to which the inner activity of people proceeds. A substantial *Volkgeist* is not necessary in the first place to understand these laws, and *Volkgeist* is consequently nothing more than ‘the bond, the principle, the idea of the people’ (ibid.: 12). This is the anything-but-substantialist, or even explicitly anti-substantialist, relational-processual definition of *Volkgeist* by Lazarus, the conceptual core of *Völkerpsychologie* and its most influential part. It provided a fundamentally pluralistic if not constructionist understanding of membership in groups and societies.

Later, in his ‘Synthetic Thoughts on *Völkerpsychologie*’ (1865, re-edited in Lazarus, 2003: 131–238), Lazarus extended his non-Hegelian, non-essentialist interpretation of the notion of *Volkgeist* and developed it further into *objektiver Geist* (objective spirit). Even though Lazarus borrowed the very term from Hegel, he turned it against him by “de-metaphysicising” it, away from speculation about abstract reason and the essential existence of the spirit, towards an empirical analysis of its reality (Lessing, 1985: 61). Hegel defined ‘spirit’ as something substantial, as “individual, acting, utterly alive” (Hegel, 1917: 31), ‘national spirit’ as the spirit of a people in history that is able to grasp itself (ibid.: 42), while ‘objective spirit’ meant the “absolute idea” (Hegel, 1970: § 483) that manifested itself in law, morality and *Sittlichkeit* [ethical life]. What interested Lazarus more than abstract speculations was an ‘objective spirit’ as something *produced* and *created* by humans in their “spiritual coexistence” (Lazarus, 2003: 175). And he did not restrict the sense of ‘objective spirit’ to the realms of law, morality and the state but also included art, religion and philosophy (which Hegel had attributed to the ‘absolute spirit’). Moreover, for Lazarus *all* intellectual and material manifestations of human activity belonged to the world of ‘objective spirit’, which he paraphrased as the “content and form of the intellectual life”, including thoughts, views, beliefs, ways of feeling as well as materialisations as works of art, writings, buildings, tools, machines, products, but also rituals, abilities and institutions (Lazarus, 2003: 190). Or, as Köhnke has put it, the human ‘*natura altera*’ (Köhnke, 2003: XXXV), in the same sense as today’s broad understanding of *culture*: the world of objectified products of human expressions and actions that comes to exist through the action of individual humans and at the same time is existentially shaping every human being. This cultural theory of the ‘objective spirit’ was taken on by Dilthey, Simmel and their successors, and with his question of the conditions of the possibility of culture, Lazarus had laid the foundation for a study of culture that included the everyday world (Köhnke, 1990a; 2003).

The somewhat inconsistent use of terms by Lazarus and Steinthal, however, gave rise to substantialist misinterpretations, no matter how often they explicitly rejected them. But the concept *Volkgeist* by Lazarus and Steinthal also transported a certain contradiction in itself insofar as it emphasised the subjectivity and constructive nature of *Volk* (folk, people) and the interaction between the individual and the collectivity, but simultaneously

¹² Translation from Stoetzler (2008: 103), where also a complete translation of *Was heißt national?* can be found.

was embedded in normative and tendentially essentialising notions of *Volk*: In the eyes of Lazarus and Steinthal, the new science had the task of proving both causally and teleologically that the *Volk* is absolutely necessary in comparison with other groups – and that it is the ‘all-essential’ community (Lazarus and Steinthal, 1860: 5).

One of the most important tasks of *Völkerpsychologie* was to illuminate the relationship of the individual to the collectivity in its interaction, as Lazarus did in his conceptual article under the same title (1862, re-edited in Lazarus 2003: 39–129). His description of this relationship is proto-sociological. The self-awareness of the individual is based not only on its individual characteristics, inclinations, desires, attitudes, abilities, and property, but also on its *relations* to the whole:

“[S]ociety does not consist of individuals as such, but individuals exist and consist in and of society. Considered in abstract metaphysics, or going back to the real origin, we will have to imagine both members of the relationship, the whole and its parts, existing and acting simultaneously; but if we consider any historical moment, then we will even have to assert that logically, temporally, and psychologically collectivity precedes the individuals.” (Lazarus, 2003 [1862]: 82)

He meant this, however, not as the blind devotion of the subject to the collective or even its absorption in it, as his biographer Alfred Leicht imputed to him later (cf. Berek, 2020: 140–141, 497). For Lazarus, the relationship was more complex. For him, individuality remained ‘the foundation and the dignity of the human being [*der Mensch*] and everything human [*das Menschliche*]’ (Lazarus, 2003 [1862]: 107). He was not concerned with a collectivist philosophy of the We, but with a sociological re-foundation of the individual and of individuality at a time when the subject was often still understood as a monad existing somewhere outside of history and society. His theory culminated in an ideal conception of society in which society’s greatest strength arises from the highest possible freedom and individuality of every person:

“The greatest unity consists in the greatest effect of the individual on the collectivity (...) through the strongest intensification of individuality” (Lazarus, 2003 [1862]: 127).

The culture theory of Lazarus’s and Steinthal’s *Völkerpsychologie* culminated in the notion of *Mannigfaltigkeit* (manifoldness or multifariousness) which implies *difference* as well as *plurality*. The main idea behind it was to not just ‘accept’ or ‘tolerate’ diversity and difference between people but to embrace and cultivate this very *Mannigfaltigkeit* as the key feature of modern culture – or civilised society (cf. van Rahden, 2022). Marginality was a starting point for this understanding of society but something that should be discarded along the path of development. Marginality was built into this theory of culture and at the same time was a phenomenon that had to vanish because every subgroup and individual that wanted to was to become a part of the whole; nobody should be marginalised by exclusion from an assumed normality.

Accordingly, it is no surprise that Lazarus had no appreciation at all for theories about human ‘races’ that spread throughout academic and public discussions of his time and became the main foundation for modern antisemitism. Resuming the older scientific and philosophical debates between idealism and materialism, Lazarus aligns the reductionist and essentialist materialism in ‘race’ theories with the ethically and cognitively flawed political positions of the antisemitic parties:

“Anyway, this blood-and-race-theory is in its entirety a product of a general coarsely sensualist-materialistic worldview (...) The arousal of the meanest and basest antagonism, of racial or tribal hatred is the effect, sometimes even the cause of this materialism, always its accompaniment. I call it the meanest and basest because it is the most bestial, because it flares up among animals for no reason other than difference (...) If we have to talk about blood then, for my part, I declare solemnly that blood means bloody little to me, while spirit and historical evolution mean almost everything when it comes to the value and dignity of humans, individuals or tribes.” (Lazarus, 1880: 73–74)¹³

INFLUENCING DISCOURSES

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, *Völkerpsychologie* proved to be a welcome part of the German national project, which was the explicit intention of its founders. Its subjective-dynamic definition of the nation struck a nerve among the educated, bourgeois, liberal patriots who saw themselves as supporters of a German *Kulturnation* (culture nation). That is one reason why *Völkerpsychologie*, in the understanding of Lazarus, was well-known in German-speaking feuilletons, the other lay in the second part of the endeavour: *Völkerpsychologie* meaning a characterology of people interested in distinguishing people according to their assumed cultural characteristics.

¹³ Translation from: Stoetzler (2008: 330).

As stressed before, the approach of Lazarus and Steinthal in no way meant the substantialist-biological *origin* model of collective belonging, but rather the dynamic-cultural *pluralism* model of socialisation. In the public perception, however, this reading of *Völkerpsychologie* was almost always marginalised, in part due to the wide scope of interpretation that it offered. Thus, proponents of folk psychological analysis could pick out only the comparative or chauvinistic elements of *Völkercharakterologie* (characterology of people) and thus negate the constructionist and individualistic elements. This selective perception can be found in the general press, in texts by sociologists from Gustav Schmoller (Schmoller, 2010 [1898]: 14) to Georg Simmel (1888: 47), even in Jewish and Zionist sources (Nordau, 1909: 136–139; Hurwicz, 1920: 6–9), and not surprisingly among National Socialist folk psychologists like Willy Hellpach (1938; cf. Berek, 2020: 252–289).

At the end of the 19th century, *Völkerpsychologie* was increasingly associated with Lazarus's Judaism – both by himself and by voices in the Jewish press. His social theory was interpreted as a bulwark of integration against the exclusionary attacks of the antisemites, but also as a contribution to the self-understanding of a German-national Judaism, with its subjective-dynamic definition of the nation. In terms of content, Lazarus's ideas thus also became interesting for cultural Zionism (Coralnik, 1903).

But probably the most important influence of this project of a social theory from the German-Jewish margin was the role *Völkerpsychologie* played historically as a predecessor of sociology, anthropology and the study of culture. Lazarus had developed a modern, pluralist and constructionist social theory that – through his pupils Georg Simmel and Franz Boas – shaped the development of those disciplines, especially through its understanding of society as constructed in plurality and diversity and also by marginal groups. Research since the 1980s has carved out in detail the far-reaching impact that Lazarus and Steinthal, as founders of a new, modern cultural science, had on sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, and cultural philosophy (Köhnke, 1984, 1990a, 1990b, 2003; Lessing, 1985; Kalmar, 1987; Graevenitz, 1999; Trautmann-Waller, 2008; Hartung, 2012). This had already been anticipated around the middle of the century by the cultural philosopher Ernst Cassirer (2004) who called *Völkerpsychologie* a psychology of symbolic forms, and Ferdinand Tönnies (1908) who had attested to its anticipation of highly modern thoughts from which sociology could still learn. As a discipline, however, it has undoubtedly failed in the eyes of researchers, due to internal contradictions such as the one between pluralistic cultural theory and Eurocentric characterology of people (cf. Graevenitz, 1999; Klautke, 2013), but also due to external factors such as the increasingly racist interpretation of the term *Völke* or the experimental-scientific development of psychology, not least through Wilhelm Wundt, who with his mammoth work of the same name was regarded as the new representative of *Völkerpsychologie*. In the second half of the 19th century, Lazarus's relationist-sociological and historical take on psychology remained just as prominent as he himself was considered one of the most important psychologists. At the end of the century, however, he and his approach have been increasingly marginalised by the individual-experimental strand of psychology that was on its way to dominating the discipline.

CONCLUSION

Lazarus and his work are an example of how someone could live at the centre of society and still be marginalised, how living at the margins can shape the theoretic reflection on society, and at the same time how this theory can then become a part of political and social struggles to overcome marginality. Lazarus's ideas were accepted, absorbed selectively or contested, but, in the end, the ambivalence of the perception stems from the modernity of his questions and conclusions. He was a prominent representative of an era of national-liberal and idealist optimism that ended around 1879. Marginality, however, can also be constructed post festum. This article has demonstrated how Jews like Lazarus were actively co-constructing the German national project in the 19th century, in many cases without being questioned. This is something antisemitic non-Jews could neither bear nor reconcile with their idea of a homogeneous Christian nation. They had to wipe the traces of this German-Jewish co-construction from history and were widely successful in doing so. From a post-Shoah position, one can hardly imagine how normal the German-Jewish existence could be in the second half of the 19th century.¹⁴ **Figure 1** might illustrate this normality. It shows the three presidents of the Jewish Reform Synod in Leipzig in 1869, Josef Wertheimer, M. Lazarus and Abraham Geiger. While this was an event of inner-Jewish relevance, the noteworthy fact about the picture and the article it accompanied is that it appeared on the title page of a popular German general illustrated journal, the *Leipziger Illustrirte Zeitung*. To consequently remove facts like these from German memory culture, as it has been done in the 20th century, was useful and indispensable for the homogenisation of the German nation, which culminated in its most radical implementation by the National Socialists.

¹⁴ And not only in Germany, of course, see the situation in the Habsburg Empire (Hödl, 2013).



Obler Ritter v. Wertheimer.

Professor Dr. M. Lazarus.

Rabbiner Dr. K. Griger.

Die Präsidenten der ersten israelitischen Synode zu Leipzig.

Figure 1. Facsimile of title page, *Illustrierte Zeitung*, July 31, 1869, vol. 53 (July/December 1869), reproduction: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, permalink: <https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb10498744>.

The case of the marginal man Lazarus in the centre of German society not only shows that homogeneity of modern societies is always a fiction and can only be realised by exerting violence. It also reminds us that such marginalisations can limit conceptual spaces, remove interesting if not promising ideas of how to organise society from the realm of the imaginable and thus limit the flexibility of society to develop and react to challenges. This also concerns (scholarly) thinking about society: the *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal had been forgotten for decades and only began to be rediscovered in the 1980s, and then it turned out that the cultural turn they had proposed had since been reinvented.

Lazarus's theory of culture based on and developed through *Mannigfaltigkeit* (plurality) is useful as a descriptive as well as a normative tool to engage with the modern situation. His proto-constructivist, voluntaristic take on the relation between the individual and its society provides answers to some of the major questions bigger societies

still struggle with: how to negotiate the needs of dominant and marginal groups, how to balance the inseparable and mutually essential relations between tradition and transformation, the subject and its collectives, the ideas and the structures, the particular and the universal, or the local and the global. And a closer look at the inner contradiction between this pluralistic theory and Lazarus's own affirmation of the nation can be taken as learning material on how the impact of such ideas is being sabotaged when one holds on to others that are incompatible. In the case of Lazarus, that led to the widespread selective public perception of the *Völkerpsychologie*, where mostly the folk characterology part had been embraced, not the more progressive pluralism and proto-constructivism. In a time where increasingly large parts of democratic societies also redevelop an inclination towards the certainties and homogeneity of the tribal fire (Bauman, 2017), the thought of Lazarus, how it was shaped by his marginal situation, but also how it shaped his world and changed his situation, at least for a certain period, has some old-new answers to those challenges. Lazarus's theory delivers intriguing arguments that strong collectivity can be firmly grounded in individualism and that the problems of complex modern societies will not be solved by absolutist answers but always by looking for the relations. And all that, in no small part, can be attributed to his own position at the centre and the margins.

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