



A “postcolonial” reading of Neolog Judaism in Hungary

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Neolog Judaism in Hungary

- Schism at the 1868/69 Jewish congress

5 and 6 February 2019, call-for-papers:
<http://jewishcongress1868.elte.hu/>

- Hungarian offshoot of positive-historical Judaism.
- Constellation different from Germany:
 - orthodoxy, heirs of the Chatam Sofer
 - no reform between 1850 and 1990
 - “status quo ante” communities in-between



Contemporary discussion:

What is neology?

- Liberal orthodoxy?
- Moderate reform?



Contemporary discussion: *What is neology?*

- Modern orthodoxy
- Conservative/masorti



rabbi *Róbert Frölich*



rector *Károly Vajda*



Is Neology a *Hungaricum*?

[Hungaricum = Hungarian specialty, such as *goulash soup*, *Tokay wine*, *paprika* or *Rubik's Cube*.]

Debate on *Szombat.org*:

- *Slomó Köves* (Chabad), 2014:
Neolog Judaism as a *hungaricum*
- Responses by
the late prof. rabbi *József Schweitzer*
and by *Gábor Schweitzer*, among others



Slomó Köves

(szombat.org, 12 March 2014)



“(...) Contrary to popular belief, the neolog, orthodox and status quo streams did not split in the nineteenth century along theological lines, but – maybe surprisingly at first sight – along questions pertaining to politics and the power, anti-Semitism and assimilation. (...) German reform never gained a foothold in our fatherland [*sic!*] (...) the neolog movement never developed a theology different from orthodoxy (...) The neolog movement in Hungary was driven by something very different: the compulsion for conformity. (...)”



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How to interpret this debate?



Suggestion:

“colonialist” vs. “postcolonialist”
readings of nineteenth century
Hungarian Jewish history



Postcolonial theory in Jewish studies



Postcolonial theory as a “set of conceptual resources” for the study of the *Wissenschaft*:

- Susannah Heschel (1998, 1999):
“The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (...) is one of the earliest examples of postcolonialist writing.”
“Postcolonial theory’s recognition that minority literature is characterized by counterdiscursive practices helps to illuminate Geiger’s work (...)”
- Ran HaCohen (2010)



Postcolonial theory in Jewish studies



Postcolonial theory as a “set of conceptual resources” for the study of the *Wissenschaft*:

- German – and similarly, Hungarian – Jewry as “internal colony”?
- “Slaves” imprisoned within their master’s discourse about them?
- “Postcolonial discourse” emerging after “decolonization” takes place?





Text samples

A random sample from infinitely many similar texts. Needless to say, similar texts could also be abundantly found in other European countries in the nineteenth century.



Móric Rosenthal: *A zsidó és a korszellem Európában* (1841, 'The Jew and the Zeitgeist in Europe')

“(...) Moses, the improver of men said that God told us through him that he would bring us to a country full of milk and honey; to a country with deep rivers in the middle of fields rich of corn spikes (...) to a country where wheat, grain, wine and everything similar grow exuberantly, to a country with stones giving iron, mountains giving ore (...) This promised land we have found in our beloved Hungarian fatherland. (...)”



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“(...) As the proverb says: *‘Extra Hungariam non est vita, si est vita, non est ita.’* But to this glorious country we brought no property and no treasure, we have not fought for it, neither shed our blood for it. Thus, we have not settled as conquerors, but as immigrants, accepted by the noble and generous Hungarians, and by their support and help did we rise to the current status. As a tribute to this generosity, we must adopt their national virtues and customs, as the pattern of our **union**. (...)”



Lajos Kossuth (*Pesti Hírlap*, 1844)

“If I were asked in what fashion could Jews prepare their full emancipation most effectively, I would reply, ‘With timely reforms.’ Let them establish a general Sanhedrin to place their religion under thorough scrutiny to determine what is genuine dogma and its appropriate ritual expression (...) It may indeed have been once wisely legislated by Moses the great statesman, but adherence to it in Christian states only serves to thwart **amalgamation** [*egybeforrás*] with other classes of the public (...)”

M. Silber, 1987, p. 137.



Call of the *Arad Israelite Reform Association* (24 April 1848)

“In order to fade the objection and the non substantiated allegations, according to which Jews dissociate themselves from the other congregations by means of their religious rituals, and in order to avoid religious institutions to create antagonism in social relations, radical reforms are necessary in the Jewish religion (...)”

- *followed by six proposals, incl. moving Shabbat to Sunday, abolishing kashrut, circumcision, fast days, and the Talmudic legal system...*



Ludwig Blau, 1901

(*Magyar-Zsidó Szemle*, on Jewish ethnography)

“To the contrary, the great conquering power of the Hungarian nation and the patriotism of the Hungarian Jewry are illustrated by the fact that the Hungarian language has become widespread in our confession in the last half a century, and the German language has been displaced (...)”

“The Hungarian Jew is the product of the Hungarian land, and coming to know it is a constitutive part of coming to know the Hungarian fatherland.”



Miksa Szabolcsi (*Egyenlőség*, 1890)

The “progressive” countryside III.

“(…) this kind [of rabbi] has a specific feature (...) he devotes all his thoughts to what the Christian honoraries say of him, how they assess his rabbinic doings. Who cares about the *Yore Deah*, the *Orach Chaim*, the *Even Ezer*, the *Choshen Mishpot*, the four *Turim*, the *Yad ha-Chazaka*, *Rif*, *Rosh* and the 36 volumes of *Gemara*, if the local authority has once said audibly, a fact known even by the babies in the congregation: ‘What a rabbi...!’. (...)”



Miksa Szabolcsi (*Egyenlőség*, 1890)

The “progressive” countryside III.

(...) The rabbi without principles, who experiences the gigantic effect on the members of the congregation made by even the minutest remark of an esteemed Christian, will do his utmost to gain appreciation by the illustrious Christian society. He can do so very cheaply. It suffices to ‘reform’, and to expose the ancient Jewish spirit, traditions and virtues to public ridicule. (...)”



Interim summary



- Nineteenth century Jewish discourse in Hungary can indeed be analyzed in terms of (post)colonial theory.

- One possible reading: reforms only in order to acquire the benevolence of the Christian society.

“Internal colony” vs. aiming at “union”, “amalgamation”?

- Needless to say: several different voices existed in parallel.





Reading and re-reading 19th century Jewish history

- *The colonized voice:*
old-style Hungarian-Jewish neolog narratives still present, albeit heavily reshaped and tuned down after 20th century history.
- *The postcolonized voice:*
 - “Dissimilationist” Chabad: counter-narrative.
 - S. Heschel’s counter-narratives in Hungarian *Wissenschaft*? E.g. Samuel Kohn’s *Khazar theory*?
- *The postmodern historian:*
no single narrative; heterogeneity & complexity.





Thank you for your attention!

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