



CHICAGO JOURNALS

**HOPOS**

The International Society  
for the History of  
Philosophy of Science

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Steven Gimbel, *Einstein's Jewish Science: Physics at the Intersection of Politics and Religion*  
Einstein's Jewish Science: Physics at the Intersection of Politics and Religion by Steven  
Gimbel

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*HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science*,  
Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 160-164

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [International Society for the History of  
Philosophy of Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/668914>

Accessed: 14/05/2013 14:59

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Steven Gimbel. *Einstein's Jewish Science: Physics at the Intersection of Politics and Religion*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. 245. \$24.95 (cloth).

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Steven Gimbel's new book deals with a highly provocative question: Can the claim made in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s by some right-wing (and later Nazi) physicists that Albert Einstein's theories were "Jewish science" be rescued "from the intellectual dung heap," as the author chooses to put it (3)? He urges us not to dismiss outright "the claims made in defense of Nazism's ghastly creed" and to attempt to ponder this issue seriously. He even tries to use Einstein himself in support of his theory by referring to the "profound connection" the renowned physicist perceived between the Jews' "nature" and "the numerous interpretations they give to what they think and feel" (4). However, there is no evidence that by making this claim, Einstein assumed any connection between the ethnic

identity of Jewish scientists and the contents or methods of the science they engaged in. Indeed, Einstein repeatedly defined the role of the physicist as striving for universal elementary laws. Not only was ethnic identity in this pursuit irrelevant, Einstein viewed the goal of science as the escape “from personal life into the world of objective perception and thought” (Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* [New York: Modern Library, 1954], 225). In regard to his own work, he told the archbishop of Canterbury in 1921 that “relativity is a purely scientific matter and has nothing to do with religion” (quoted in Philipp Frank, *Einstein: His Life and Times* [New York: Knopf, 1947], 190).

In the course of his confused and confusing book, Gimbel provides the reader with several different, self-contradictory answers to its core question; that is, was Einstein’s physics “Jewish science”? He first maintains that although Einstein was defined as a Jew both by Jewish orthodoxy and Nazi race laws, by the time he worked on relativity, he neither believed in God nor observed Jewish ritual customs. Therefore, Gimbel concludes that, sociologically, the theory of relativity is and is not “Jewish science” (38). Next, the author uses a highly selective and reductionist definition of the essence of Jewishness by maintaining that Einstein’s physics can only be viewed as Jewish “if his work can be traced specifically to biblical or Talmudic sources” (39). Gimbel thereby dismisses 1,500 years of religious, philosophical, and cultural contributions made by Jews since the Talmud was completed. He reveals his blatant ideological bias when he claims that “all contemporary Western science is to some degree religious science” (42). After a superficial examination of the possible biblical or Talmudic roots of relativity, Gimbel concludes that “none of [the] influences were Jewish” (57). Instead, the author acknowledges the crucial impact on Einstein of the Dutch gentile physicist Hendrik A. Lorentz.

Gimbel then broadens his inquiry to examine “whether there is a Jewish version of the scientific method,” of which Einstein’s theories would be the prime example. He dismisses the “Nazi argument” that a “typically Jewish style of thinking” influenced the theory of relativity, yet he agrees with them on the existence of a Jewish methodology of thinking (68–69). In his opinion, Descartes’s theories were methodologically “Catholic-style,” as they were influenced by “the Catholic top-down approach to knowledge,” and Newton practiced a “Protestant-style” scientific method, as his theories reflected Protestantism’s emphasis on “a relationship with the Divine unmediated by an organizational institution” (82). As for Einstein’s theories, even though he previously ruled out that they were influenced by the Talmud in any way, Gimbel now claims that there is “an analogy to draw between Talmudic interpretation and the theory of relativity” (96). Gimbel sees both of them as committing to “the existence of an absolute truth that can only be glimpsed through limited perspectives” (103).

Gimbel terms this methodology “Jewish style” thinking and concludes that “Einstein’s advances [are] methodologically Jewish science” (69). This is an utterly anachronistic point of view: it is absurd to claim that throughout their history, Jews have consistently exhibited the same way of thinking. It is, indeed, slightly comical for the author to term this methodology “Jewish-style” thinking. Such thinking is apparently not bona fide Jewish; it is merely “Jewish-style.” Perhaps he had “kosher-style” delis in mind when he devised this terminology. But it gets worse. In his typically schlock style, Gimbel terms Einstein “an intellectual mohel [i.e., circumciser] who, by circumscribing the metaphysically absolute status of space and time, made physics ‘Jewish style’” (98). That hurts, intellectually, if not physically.

Gimbel next explores whether this “Jewish-style” methodology can be found “in the work of all other Jewish scientists.” He quickly dismisses psychoanalysis, where the analyst plays a God-like role, as being “indicative of a ‘Christian-style’ not a ‘Jewish-style’ methodology.” Gimbel therefore absurdly concludes that “not all Jewish scientists do ‘Jewish-style’ science” (106). Slightly confused? Me too. In contrast to Sigmund Freud, Gimbel claims that Emile Durkheim’s “approach to sociology is methodologically ‘Jewish-style’ in the same way that Einstein’s theory of relativity is” (110).

Gimbel then deals with the German “Aryan science” movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The most prominent representatives of the movement were the right-wing activist Paul Weyland, the experimental physicist Ernst Gehrke, and the Nobel Prize laureate Phillip Lenard. These proponents of “Aryan science” espoused a methodology that aimed to “begin with careful and thorough observation and look for underlying archetypal structures.” In contrast, “Jewish science” was seen as undermining “Aryan science” in its striving to be “objective and therefore universal” (142 and 146). Having made this distinction between “Jewish” and “Aryan” science, Gimbel now maintains that Einstein’s “rethinking of the basic notions of physics derived from the results of rigorous observation.” This leads him to the absurd (and self-contradictory) claim that “Einstein was doing Aryan science.” The author maintains that “Einstein seems to be more of an Aryan thinker than a Jewish one by the Nazi’s [*sic*] own lights” (151–53). How can one possibly take this book seriously?

Gimbel also tries to explore whether relativity can be deemed a “Jewish science” by examining whether it was part of the discourse among contemporary Jewish intellectuals. He dismisses the possibility of relativity having any influence on Jewish philosophy itself, yet at the same time claims that “to assimilated Jewish intellectuals, Einstein was crucial” (175). His examples of such intellectuals are thoroughly unconvincing: he cites Einstein’s positive influence on Hans Reichenbach (who was half Jewish) and Moritz Schlick

(who was not Jewish at all) and his negative reception by Edmund Husserl (who was baptized).

In the final chapter, Gimbel tries to draw some general conclusions. He maintains that “in most of the ways we’ve examined,” relativity is not “Jewish science.” In an attempt at being overly clever, he claims that “what makes the theory of relativity so important to Jews is precisely that it is *not* Jewish science.” He claims that all Jews see relativity as “a symbol of [a] new being in the world.” Einstein’s Jewishness is seen as “the very epitome of marginalization by the powerful” (209–12). In yet another contradiction, Gimbel advances the absurd notion that because Einstein “made our understanding of the universe more amazing, more awesome, more beautiful . . . one cannot but call the theory of relativity Jewish science.” He then renders this conclusion even more meaningless: “But, then, one would also have to consider all great science to be Jewish science” (38). However, because Einstein, in Gimbel’s view, could have easily been a member of any given minority, he “is a universally recognizable symbol of the new liberation” for “every oppressed group” in the world. He views the “Jewish-style” reasoning he has postulated as providing the basis for “a cosmopolitan epistemology” (212–13). In the last paragraph of his book, Gimbel once again repeats the question he has been asking throughout his book: “So, is Einstein’s theory of relativity Jewish science?” His answer is, “Yes and no. And *that* is precisely what makes it Jewish” (217). This is being too cute by far. The final words are like the punch line in a very bad Jewish joke. Gimbel merely reinforces the stereotype of the Jew as being neurotic and indecisive and as not willing to be pinned down on one viewpoint.

In tandem with Gimbel’s absurd claims, his book at times descends into a schlock style, especially when dealing with Jewish matters: Einstein’s mother “was in many ways the stereotypical *yiddisher Mame*” (15), scientists before Einstein had “all been doing *goyische*-style science” (97), and “the Nazis sure were bothered by” relativity (209). If its nonsensical claims and distasteful style were not bad enough, the book also contains numerous factual errors that make us doubt the author’s reliability: Gimbel erroneously states that Einstein’s mother “had deep roots in northern German Jewish society” (15), whereas she actually came from southern Germany. He maintains that Einstein “was in the mainstream of European Jewry at the time in being a Zionist” (34). This is wrong on two counts: Einstein was not a Zionist, and the Zionists were not part of the mainstream among European Jewry in the interwar years. Similarly, he claims that “the cultured Jews of Germany looked to their non-urban, less-well-off cousins as the embodiment of the ‘true Jew’” (168). In fact, most German Jews had strong disdain for their coreligionists from Eastern Europe. He makes Einstein’s friend Michele Besso

a member of the “Olympia Academy” (59) when in fact he was not. Embarrassingly, Gimbel mistranslates “victorious peace” as “Siegfriede” (instead of “Siegfrieden”) and claims that the term has “Wagnerian overtones” (125). He also repeats the common error that the German Democratic Party (the DDP) was “Einstein’s party” (136). There is an unacceptable grammatical howler that is repeated several times: “Nazis” is repeatedly misspelled as “Nazi’s” (146, 151, and 153). The book also includes some jarring anachronisms and inconsistencies: Galileo is seen as being “part of the military-industrial complex long before it became a complex” (44); in the introduction, we are promised a discussion of whether relativity had an impact on Erich Fromm and Walter Benjamin (12), yet they are mysteriously never mentioned again.

The question remains: Does this book rescue the issue of whether Einstein’s theories are “Jewish science” from the “intellectual dung heap,” as its author desires? Unfortunately not.

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