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# Commentary on the article *For whom and about what? The Polin Museum, Jewish historiography, and Jews as a “Polish cause”* by Kamil Kijek

Katrin Stoll

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**Abstract:** The text is a short commentary on the article *For whom and about what? The Polin Museum, Jewish historiography, and Jews as a “Polish cause,”* reconstructing and deconstructing the author’s argument.

**Keywords:** Museum of the History of Polish Jews; polinization; antisemitic imaginarium; Jedwabne Debate.

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The article *For whom and about what? The Polin Museum, Jewish historiography, and Jews as a “Polish cause”* (Kijek, 2017b) deals with the serious, scholarly criticism of the core exhibition of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews offered by those whom the author categorizes as representatives of the academic field of Polish-Jewish studies and labels as “liberal critics,” “advocates of a critical history” and “left-wing reviewers” respectively. The author, Kamil Kijek, works at the Jewish Studies Department (Katedra Judaistyki) at the University of Wrocław. Between 2007 and 2012, he worked for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, collecting material for the core exhibition as well as preparing parts of the Museum exhibition concerning the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

In his text, Kijek deals with a fragment of the debate. He does not engage with all the voices and arguments presented during the discussion of the Museum’s core exhibition (see Kijek, 2017b, p. 3, footnote 2). This is certainly legitimate. However, the author does not provide any explanation concerning the criteria that proved decisive for his choice to deal with certain critics as well as certain aspects of their analyses at the expense of others. It is necessary to provide such an explanation. I was surprised to find that important scholarship on the subject of the Museum and the discourse of majority–minority relations has either not been considered at all (such as the article by Piotr Forecki and Anna Zawadzka; Forecki & Zawadzka, 2015) or if it has, is only mentioned in passing (such as Elżbieta Janicka’s analysis; Janicka, 2016). The author mainly focuses on what Konrad Matyjaszek has termed “polinization of history,” i.e., the turning of the notion of *Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów* into a political instrument serving the interests of contemporary Poland. Matyjaszek has identified “polinization” as a means of taming the reality of the Holocaust and exorcising the site of Muranów as one of the places in which this

reality took place (Matyjaszek, 2015). Kijek rejects the idea that polinization is the meta or master narrative of the core exhibition. He turns the idea on its head by claiming that the argument of polinization is indicative of an instrumental treatment of Jews as well as of an attitude that displays interest only in Poles, not in Jews as the living subjects and agents of their own history. He claims that both left-wing and right-wing Polish critics share this attitude. In the version of the article originally submitted for review, Kijek wrote: "In their idea of the history of the Jews as demanded by the Polish critics of the exhibition it is the Poles not the Jews that matter in the main." This characterization is not only a sweeping generalization, it is also false. The author misses the central point that is at the heart of the serious criticism levelled at the exhibition: the analysis of the various perceptions and representations of the reality of the Jewish minority (including representations of this reality on the part of Jews themselves) as well as a de-construction of prevalent myths and of the mental structure of imagined Jews in Polish culture and tradition.

Kijek's article is divided into seven parts (including the introduction). The author aims to demonstrate that

nationalistic discourse, which is dominant in the public space and which reduces the whole history of Jews in Poland to the problem of "the Jews and the Polish cause," has a considerable impact on the discussions conducted within these two research fields [Polish-Jewish studies and Jewish studies] and on certain misunderstandings between those two fields (Kijek, 2017b, s. 2).

In the chapter entitled "Autonomy, connection, pluralism – the core exhibition at the Polin Museum," Kijek draws attention to what he considers to be the most important themes of the various galleries of the core exhibition. It is striking that the first gallery ("Forest") receives no mention. This omission is problematic. As a result, both a central element of the *imaginarium* of the exhibition and a central critical voice in the debate are ignored. Elżbieta Janicka has pointed out that the "Forest" gallery presents the 19th century mythic image of Poland as a hospitable country and culture. It has a "macabre reverse" or underbelly: the forest, "an emblematic figure of the Holocaust" (Janicka, 2016, p. 125).<sup>1</sup>

Reading the chapter "Autonomy, connection, pluralism," I was wondering why the author did not refer to what the critics had to say on the various galleries of the core exhibition. Kijek simply outlines what he considers to be the most important issues. However, his reading of the evidence as presented by the exhibition, which he puts forward in an objective mode, is merely one interpretation. This should have been made clear by the author. In a scholarly text dealing with the criticism of the core exhibition, more attention needs to be given to other interpretations of the various galleries. Scientific rigour

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<sup>1</sup> Janicka writes: "The forest is an emblematic figure of the Holocaust in its broad definition: both in the sense of the German process of industrial extermination and of what we nowadays call 'the margins of the Holocaust'" (Janicka, 2016, p. 125).

demands that the author takes into account opposing positions, thereby demonstrating how much his position within the academic debate differs from or chimes with that of others. However, this requires that Kijek turn his attention to the existing analyses, the current state of research, as it were. I strongly believe that it is necessary not only to focus on what is displayed in the exhibition but also on what has been omitted, either consciously or unconsciously. If we examine the omissions, we begin to understand that the core exhibition falls short of an important goal: a re-interpretation of cultural objects as well as of the meaning of historical events. A case in point would be the omission of the Polish context of the Kristallnacht examined by Elżbieta Janicka.

There is no gallery of the core exhibition entitled “Antisemitism in Poland. Past and Present.” Kijek believes that it is neither possible nor appropriate to present a comprehensive history of antisemitism in a museum concerned with the history of Jews. He argues that the representation of antisemitism should be restricted to the ways it impacts on the “situation and living conditions” of Jews and points out that “antisemitism as a Jewish experience” is missing in the museum (Kijek, 2017b, p. 9). However, one also has to take into consideration the antisemitic *imaginarium*, because antisemitism, whatever else we may say about it, is based on false projection, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno put it. Perpetrators of antisemitic violence do not react to “the immediate reality of Jews but to the image/figure of the ‘Jew’ which circulates and has been constructed in their tradition” (Žižek, 2008, p. 67).<sup>2</sup> Gentiles keep track of who is a Jew. Antisemitism is an integral part of the dominant concept of community and identity in Poland. That Kijek is aware of this fact becomes apparent by the understanding of antisemitism that he puts forward in a text published elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore we have to examine definitions and representations of the imagined Jew, if we want to understand why, as Kijek puts it, antisemitism has been “a permanent element of the life and experience of Polish Jews” (Kijek, 2017b, p. 9), a fact that is absent from the exhibition. This omission is identified by the author as a “fundamental problem” (see the chapter “Weaknesses of the narrative and narrative weaknesses”). According to him, a further weakness is the fact that the exhibition, like the historiography of the Jews in Poland in the 20th century in general, has not adequately demonstrated the relationship between inter-war antisemitism and the history of the Holocaust. This is a very important point that warrants further attention and raises the question of why this might be the case. One reason seems to be that Polish historians are reluctant to acknowledge the sheer scale of antisemitism. In 2008, Michael C. Steinlauf wrote that

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2 See also Maria Janion’s definition of antisemitism. According to Janion, “antisemitism is an absolute phantasmatic product. It is an area of ideas and images independent of reality, a production of phantasms” (Janion, 2004, p. 68). Cf. also Janion, 2009, p. 107.

3 In the introduction to a volume on *Antysemityzm po polsku 1905–1937* [Antisemitism alla polacca 1905–1939], Kijek and Krzywiec write: “Antisemitism will be understood here more broadly as a certain cultural code, entering in different ways into the composition of the political ideologies and the broader political discourse, [present] in literature and art, and also through the set of stereotypes and negative symbols of and associations with Jews, different literary, ideological as well as commonplace perceptions of them, often as an organic element of the enemy image of ‘The Other,’ ‘The Other as Foreign,’ through which the community can construct and then define the image of itself” (Kijek & Krzywiec, 2016, p. 243).

“the very term continues to make many Polish historians uneasy” (Steinlauf, 2008, p. 322). Helena Datner’s conclusion that antisemitism appears to be a “cultural pattern” (*wzór kultury*), “widespread in the sense of not belonging to any particular group in society,” as well as universal “in the sense that it was and is widespread in time and place” (Datner-Śpiwak, 1996, pp. 58–59), has not been taken up by Holocaust historians in Poland.

As far as the core exhibition’s method of narrating is concerned, Kijek writes that the curatorial solution to convey the most important aspects of the content by means of quotes has failed. However, he does not agree with the reproach that the exhibition hides behind quotes. According to the author, a characteristic feature of all criticism levelled at the exhibition is their assertion that a unified interpretation of the history of the Jews is missing. He claims that such criticism only comes from scholars working in the field of “Polish-Jewish relations,” not from historians of the Jews. This is not true. To give just one example: Helena Datner, whom the author refers to, wrote a book on the history of the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia of Warsaw in the second half of the 19th century (Datner, 2007). She is therefore not only a sociologist but also a historian of the Jews of Warsaw.

Kijek writes that the critics have a teleological view of history. However, to emphasize that the exhibition has neglected the central role of the Holocaust and antisemitism, as the critics do, is not the same as interpreting the entire history of the Jews in Poland exclusively through the prism of the Holocaust, as the author claims they do. The author reproaches them with having ignored “the latest achievements of Jewish historiography” (Kijek, 2017b, p. 12) produced in Poland and abroad, such as Jewish historiography on the inter-war period. It is not the case that the critics are not interested in the pluralism and diversification of Jewish society of the inter-war period or the experience of Jews as part of the history of Poland, as claimed by the author. It is rather that they interpret the emphasis that the exhibition places on the “cultural richness” of the Jews as a way of de-politicizing an entire historical period in general and the struggle on the part of Jews for political rights and equality and a society free of antisemitism in particular.

In the chapter “Is it truly ‘Polinization’? If so – of what kind?” Kijek makes the general claim that the left-wing and right-wing critics are only concerned with Poles, and not with Jews as individual subjects. He thereby creates a false symmetry. A more careful reading of the serious scholarly criticism reveals that this claim is untenable. Compare for example the chapter “An Interlude” in Janicka’s text titled *The Embassy of Poland in Poland*, devoted to the Yiddish writer Ayzik Vayter (1878–1919), who was murdered by Poles in a pogrom in Vilnius (Janicka, 2016, pp. 144–146). This interlude is not only a form of individual memory of a forgotten Jewish author, it also confronts the reader with the reality of exclusion and violence and the fact that this very reality is deprived of its significance within the framework of a de-politicized inter-war gallery.

Kijek emphasizes (see the chapter entitled “Dangers”) that there is a fundamental threat that the exhibition might be misused for the production of a simplified, distort-

ed and politicized idea of “history of the Polish nation,” i.e., an idea of nation that is based on an ethnic understanding of society and history (as opposed to a citizen-based understanding). The author also draws attention to the fact that the threats are not limited to a specific political camp.

Elaborating on the “absurdity” concerning the post-1989 gallery, mentioned by the author, I would like to briefly reflect here on the question of what it means for Polish public discourse that the Jedwabne debate has not been incorporated in the post-war gallery (official reason: lack of space). As academics we are not detached from public discourse. It has an impact on our work. Scholarly interpretations are implicated in the societal structure and embedded in the stories societies tell themselves about their own past. All history is contemporary history. We interpret the past in the present. The present-day situation in Poland is such that 15 years after the most important public debate on the Holocaust, which took place after the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Neighbors*,<sup>4</sup> the highest echelons of the Polish state, including the director of the Institute for National Remembrance, openly negate the fact that Poles murdered their Jewish neighbors in Jedwabne. The official policy-makers treat the content of the book as a lie and act as if the subsequent public debate, which “has contributed to an ongoing reevaluation of Polish national identity” (Holc, 2002, p. 453),<sup>5</sup> had never taken place. Does the absence of this important aspect of the post-1989 period, a mention of which has been prepared by the scholars working on the post-war gallery, not signify a deliberate attempt at closure? Closure within a site where by definition there can be no closure because the Museum is situated on the former site of the Warsaw ghetto.

Kijek ends by arguing that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is suited to provide an academic dialogue between scholars of Jewish studies and of Polish-Jewish studies, a relationship that he characterizes as asymmetric. He claims that the latter rarely engage with publications produced by the former, stating that this is due to the fact that in public space in Poland there is only interest in “Polish-Jewish’ debates.” Leaving aside the question of whether there is indeed a lack of acquaintance with the relevant scholarly literature on the part of those studying majority-minority relations, to claim that “Polish-Jewish debates” take centre stage in Poland is to leave out significant areas of interest that have received public attention. What about philo-Semitic violence (Janicka & Żukowski, 2016a)? What about the interest in “Jewish culture” constructed and shaped by the expectations and images of the dominant majority? (An example would be the popular annual Jewish festivals in Poland, such as the ones in Kazimierz or the Singer Festival in Warsaw.) What about institutions like the Center for Yiddish Culture (Centrum Kultury Jidysz) located in Warsaw?

Reading the article’s final sentence, I was wondering how – given the lack of common ground – Kijek is able to envisage a “joint fight” by historians of the Jews and those schol-

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4 Gershon Bacon has termed the publication of Gross’s *Neighbors* “a watershed event” (Bacon, 2007, p. 291).

5 At the same time there has been an angry backlash from those who hold on to a nationalist identity.

ars whom he places in the category of Polish-Jewish studies. What we need is critical, not traditional thinking. Traditional thinking considers identity to be its aim, critical thinking is dialectical and aims to identify the non-identical. As Adorno emphasized:

The force that shatters the appearance of identity is the force of thinking: the use of “it is” undermines the form of that appearance, which remains inalienable just the same. Dialectically, cognition of nonidentity lies also in the fact that this very cognition identifies – that it identifies to a greater extent, and in other ways, than identitarian thinking [*Identitätsdenken*]. This cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself (Adorno, 2004, p. 149).

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**Komentarz do artykułu *Dla kogo i o czym? Muzeum Polin, historiografia Żydów a Żydzi jako „sprawa polska”* Kamila Kijka**

**Abstrakt:** Tekst jest krótkim komentarzem artykułu *Dla kogo i o czym? Muzeum Polin, historiografia Żydów a Żydzi jako „sprawa polska”*, rekonstruującym i dekonstruującym argumenty autora.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich; polinizacja; imaginarium antysemityczne; debata o Jedwabnem.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

Author: Katrin Stoll, German Historical Institute in Warsaw.

Correspondence: [stoll@dhi.waw.pl](mailto:stoll@dhi.waw.pl)

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