Review: Mapping Modern Jewish Cultures

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Project
Mapping Modern Jewish Cultures

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Project URL
https://richbrew.org/

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Project Overview

Shachar Pinsker

The Mapping Modern Jewish Cultures project maps, analyzes, and reconstructs the network of Jewish café culture in cities across several continents: Odessa, Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, New York City, and Tel Aviv. The project demonstrates how urban cafés acted as a modern "silk road" in the creation of modern Jewish culture. It traces the movement of Jews across cities and cafés in Europe, the U.S., and Palestine/Israel from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries.

Examining the confluence between cafés, the urban environment, and the creativity of multilingual Jewish diasporic communities, the project demonstrates how transnational Jewish modernity was born in the café, nourished there, and sent out into the world of print, politics, literature, visual arts, and theater. It makes a vital contribution to scholarly fields such as history, literature, cultural geography, Jewish studies, urban studies, media studies, and gender studies. It also seeks to engage a general audience eager to have open access to a reliable, well-researched digital reconstruction of the world of Jewish cafés that does not exist anymore.

Over the past six years Shachar Pinsker has worked with a wide-ranging team of librarians, technicians, and visualization and geographic information systems (GIS) experts, as well as many graduate and undergraduate students, to produce a large digital collection of visual, textual, and cartographic sources related to cafés and modern Jewish culture, which can be accessed through the project's digital platform. The project began with support from Justin Joque, a visualization librarian, and Alix Keener, the digital scholarship librarian, at the University of Michigan, as well as Peter Knoop and Caitlin Dickinson, who oversee GIS at the University of Michigan. The project benefited from a number of grants from the University of Michigan, which enabled Pinsker to work with other

professors who are engaged in digital humanities projects, as well as graduate and undergraduate students from the School of Information and from the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

While part of the research and analysis is also presented in Pinsker's book, *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture* (NYU Press, 2018), crucial aspects of this project cannot be communicated in a traditional, linear humanities monograph. To overcome this challenge, the monograph is complemented by this digital, open source, media-rich scholarly publication.

Thus, the website offers multiple interlacing "pathways" for scholars, students, and curious individuals to engage with these materials: Cities, People, Stories, and Time. Each pathway emphasizes a different dimension of modern Jewish café history and culture. "Cities" invites researchers and students to explore the data geographically, allowing them to interact with a map of cafés significant to Jewish culture in each city, simultaneously juxtaposed with overlays of historical maps. The "People" visualization illustrates direct and indirect relationships among Jewish authors, artists, actors, and intellectuals across time and space by displaying mutual associations with cities and cafés in a complex web graph. A more curated, narrative-based presentation of the data is found in "Stories," a collection of StoryMaps focusing on cities, people, or themes important to the project. These StoryMaps, created through ArcGIS Online, enable highly exploratory arrangements of GIS with images, texts, hyperlinks, audio, and video. Finally, "Time" presents a linear, chronological view of the cafés explored in the project, tracing the evolution of cafés and Jewish café culture from the early 19th century to the present.

The broad multifaceted nature of this project makes it a useful resource for professional scholars, classrooms, and the general public alike. It presents an extensively researched historical narrative while inviting others to uncover alternative perspectives, therefore blurring the boundaries between teaching and research. The project complements a traditional scholarly text with a diverse selection of images, videos, interactive and static maps, network visualizations, timelines, and textual primary source material, expanding the conventional notion of "literacy" in a multimedia and multilingual context.

Mapping Modern Jewish Cultures has been awarded the Mcubed award twice for interdisciplinary research and received a New-Model Humanities Publication Grant through the Institute for Humanities at University of Michigan. The project was featured in ESRI as one of the success stories of implementing GIS in higher education and was highlighted by UM LSA Technology Services.

Project Review

Gerben Zaagsma

Mapping Modern Jewish Cultures (MMJC) is based upon research done by Shachar Pinsker for his book *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture* (NYU Press, 2018). MMJC functions as a companion to the book and as a standalone resource for a broader audience interested in the role of cafés in Jewish cultural and political history in six urban settings: Berlin, Vienna, Odessa, New York, Warsaw, and Tel-Aviv. MMJC is the product of a multidisciplinary team effort. It encourages users to explore relevant information and data about the interconnections between cafés, their urban settings, and their wider role in the creation of modern Jewish culture through four main points of entry ("Cities," "People," "Time," and "Stories"), which are meant to be complementary.

"Cities" provides maps with the locations of key cafés in the six cities, alongside some basic information. "People" offers a network visualization tool through which the links between people, the cafés they frequented, and their locations can be explored. The advantages and added value of network graphs are explained concisely. "Time" offers a timeline that lets users compare which cafés existed from the early 19th century to early 20th century. "Stories" offers richly illustrated narratives about each city. By far the best example of the potential that digital storytelling has to offer is the story about Odessa, the only one created with Scalar. The others use ESRI Storymaps.

MMJC was created with the Jekyll static site generator, with various tools (StoryMaps, Scalar and Timeline.js) embedded or linked. This mix of technologies does not always serve the project's scholarly aims in an optimal way as it makes for a somewhat disjointed user experience. Further development of the project might consider simplification of the number of technologies utilized. Using Scalar or a CMS like Omeka for all the stories could help integrate visual storytelling with maps, timelines, and information about people and objects more tightly. What the project thus, inadvertently, shows is the challenge that many digital humanities projects face when integrating the ideas and input of a large and diverse team of collaborators into a single coherent vision and product. It also suggests the need for clearer collaboration and editorial oversight in a project where both humanists and technologists participate, and students deliver much of the content.

These concerns should not detract, however, from the fact MMJC is a great example of how "traditional" scholarship can be complemented by digital resources to provide a much fuller and richer picture of a given topic. Moreover, the option to explore the primary data (GeoJSON datasets are available to download for the cafés and people; images and other sources related to the cafés are also provided) should be a model for all projects of its kind.