

**Transformations in the Argentine Jewish Community:**  
**The Rise of New Social Actors**

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Increasingly, significant numbers of Argentine Jews without a religious background are turning to orthodoxy. Although still a minority, they are well organized and contribute an identity component that was lacking in the Argentine Jewish social landscape. In the April 2008 elections for the leadership of the central institution of Argentina's Jewish community, the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), the religious list headed by the *Agudath Israel* Rabbi Samuel Levin defeated *Avoda*, the Argentine branch of the Israeli Labor Party, which had ruled the AMIA since the second half of the twentieth century. This event was the expression of institutional and identity transformations taking place in the Argentine Jewish community since the 1980s.

This paper argues that the Argentine Jewish community is undergoing a process of change related to the visibility of different groups. New identities have emerged: *baalei teshuva* ("returnees" – non-observant Jews who turn to orthodoxy), LGBT Jews, women rabbis, unaffiliated Jews. There have always been orthodox, homosexual or unaffiliated Jews, but their visibility and place in the community have changed. The ways they look at themselves and how others see them have changed, as well.

Identities are framed by narratives. In defining myself, I use symbols and definitions I did not create: I take them from a universe of references and symbols and recreate their meaning through an interactive process. I have notions about what being a Jew means and can blend various meanings and symbols. Since identity is something that must be recognized by others, however, I cannot blend whatever I want.

In the 1960s, a dominant narrative of Jewish identity emerged in the Argentine Jewish community, an ideal identity that every Jew was expected to reproduce in some degree. Other narratives defined different ways of being Jew, but they were confined to a minority. According to the dominant narrative, being Jew meant being Zionist and belonging to a Jewish institution. A communist alternative, represented by the so-called *progresistas*, was undermined by Stalin's persecution of the Jewish population in the 1950s. In the years since, a centralized model headed by the AMIA has characterized Argentina's Jewish community.

Secular ideologies shaped the early Jewish community's ideological space, with religion reduced to a minor role in identity processes. With the exception of the Jews who settled in rural areas in the late 1880s, Argentine Jews, most of them concentrated in urban centers, were hardly religious, let alone orthodox. The first Jewish institution in Buenos Aires, the Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina (CIRA), founded in 1868 as a gathering place for Jews on the High Holy Days, was inspired by its members' liberal Western European traditions. This tradition was reinforced by the Argentine state, which afforded immigrant Jews full citizenship without regard for their religion.

Orthodoxy had no place in the dominant narrative, because it was perceived as anti-Zionist and outdated. Homosexuals had no place in it, because nobody even thought about them. Unaffiliated Jews had no place, for living outside the institutional frame was seen as a sign of assimilation and lack of commitment. The weakening of this narrative over time paved the way to the transformation of the cultural configuration from which Jews take the symbols that shape their identities. Only with the transformation of the cultural configuration could new identities arise.

The process of homosexual Jewishness institutionalization in Argentina, for example, dates back to the creation of two institutions, *Keshet* (Rainbow) and JAG (Gay Argentinean Jews). German Vaizman, an activist who traveled to Boston in 2001 and made contact with a Lesbian Jewish group of the same name, created *Keshet*. After returning to Argentina, he tried to replicate the Boston institution by raising awareness of gays in the Jewish community. A homosexual Jew in Argentina had only two options, Vaizman lamented: silence or exile. Vaizman's goals were political and his objective was to transform the Jewish community. JAG had social rather than political goals, aiming to create an environment comfortable for homosexual Jews.

At first, tensions arose between *Keshet* and JAG. Eventually, however, the two united and *Keshet*

was formally dissolved. Nowadays, JAG is the only institution that represents LGBT Jews in Argentina. It pursues both social and political goals and is committed to educational programs. In 2006, JAG entered *Fundación Judaica*, an umbrella group headed by Rabbi Sergio Bergman, giving JAG institutional and financial support. It defines itself as an institution of Jews, Argentines and gays, but, as one of its members told me, everyone who wishes to be part of it is welcomed, even if he or she is not gay, Argentine or Jewish. In fact, most gay Jews date non-Jews, and a number of non-Jews attend JAG activities. JAG shares the secular outlook that Jewish identity is an individual choice. It does not matter if your mother is Jewish or not.<sup>1</sup> Commitment to Jewishness is what makes you a Jew and no formal conversion is required. I called this outlook “secular” because it is not based on *Halakha* (Jewish law) but rather on individual freedom of choice. JAG is not trying to create a community of LGBT Jews; instead, it aims to make people aware of the situation of LGBT Jews in their own communities. As one of its members said to me “JAG will win when there is no reason for it to exist.”

JAG has received support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and it is in touch with LGBT Jewish institutions around the world. It is part of the World Congress of GLBT Jews and INADI, Argentina’s National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism. It is worth noting, however, that this kind of institutionalization does not make reference to the creation of an identity, but to organizational and financial matters. In 2004, an American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee survey showed that 60% of the Jewish population remained outside the institutional frame. Instead of considering those Jews to be assimilated, JOINT engaged in organizing activities that addressed that population. This led to the creation of YOK, an initiative with the motto: “Judaism your way” (*Judaísmo a tu manera*). The project is based on the assumption that there is no one legitimate style of Judaism. Orthodoxy, in contrast, maintains that there is one true form of Judaism that predates Jews themselves. No Jew could create his own Judaism, because Judaism is a universe of beliefs and commandments given by God himself. Nevertheless, both orthodoxy and YOK, even if they represent opposite outlooks, are building a new kind of relationship between institutions and unaffiliated Jews by offering social spaces where unaffiliated Jews can reproduce their identity and submerge themselves in a universe of symbols, allowing them to make sense of their Jewish experience.

Although the very idea of “Judaism your way” is at odds with orthodoxy, the revival of orthodoxy itself took place in an environment where the self is understood as central in the identity-making processes. For many Jews, individuals *can* construct their own Judaism. This idea does not move

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, Jewish identity is passed down through matrilineal descent.

them away from orthodoxy; on the contrary, they see orthodoxy as a source of meaning. The strength of orthodoxy lies in its ability to go beyond community borders and to influence the identity-making processes of unaffiliated Jews.

The institutional approach dominates the field of Jewish studies, and the research on the orthodox revival reflects this approach. Most studies focus on the *baalei teshuva*, the “returnees.” Since the process of return implies becoming part of a community, research on this topic means studying the process of Jewish institutionalization. Notwithstanding the usefulness of this approach, the orthodox revival cannot be completely understood without taking into account the identity experiences of unaffiliated Jews, who relate to orthodoxy in different ways. Conversion is not the only way orthodoxy influences Jews. The orthodox identity space is inhabited by orthodox and non-orthodox, affiliated and unaffiliated. Orthodoxy may lead to affiliation, but it could contribute to the making of an unaffiliated Jewish identity as well.

Many researchers and social actors are beginning to use the concept of non-affiliation, but there is another concept that I believe may be more useful. Instead of unaffiliated, I prefer the concept of “peripheral actor.” This concept makes it possible to analyze how social actors relate to institutions and communities without belonging to them. They are not completely outside the institutions, but dwell instead in a peripheral zone. The making of their identity cannot be analyzed without considering the relationships they establish with institutional actors. This concept may offer some protection from the false dichotomy between institutionalization and desinstitutionalization, inside and outside.

When I researched the *Chabad-Lubavitch* (a worldwide movement that is a branch of Hasidism), I began using the concept of periphery. I realized that *Chabad* was not just a community, but a social space inhabited by different actors. *Lubavitcher* social space is divided between nucleus and periphery. The nucleus is the zone in which social actors carry out the performance that includes the identity markers – physical appearance and shared beliefs, etc. – that set clear borders between insiders and outsiders. The peripheries are zones that liberate identity markers from their role of reproducing *lubavitcher* identity and allow social actors to re-appropriate them in different ways.

Some referents acquire different meanings in the peripheries from those accepted in the nucleus. For instance, peripheral actors might re-appropriate the image of the *Rebe* (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the revered former leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch dynasty), giving it different meanings other than those held by the nuclear actors. For instance, the *Rebe* could be viewed as a

miraculous figure. Many stories feature miracles he is said to have performed. For *lubavitchers*, the main quality of the *Rebe* is not related to miracles, but to prophecy and the ability to generate identity changes in oneself. Since *lubavitchers* too are enchanted by this miraculous image, they have to learn about the difference between peripheral meanings and the nuclear one. Another example is *kashrut* (Jewish dietary law). In an attempt to make *kashrut* appeal to non-orthodox Jews, *Chabad Lubavitch* has spread a discourse that the laws are meant to improve health. This secular and scientific legitimization is addressed to the non-orthodox. The *lubavitcher* eats *kosher* because God commands it. If health benefits obtain, these are just a “side effect,” not the main reason for a *lubavitcher* to fulfill the *kashrut* commandments. The *lubavitcher* identity experience comes with the consciousness of a difference between nucleus and periphery. The *lubavitcher* learns to see himself as different from the peripheral actor. For this process to occur, he has to learn how to distinguish between the meanings he gives to the identity markers and their peripheral meanings.

Based on data obtained from my fieldwork, I have constructed a model of identity dimensions to explain how social actors experience their own identity. The model distinguishes between three dimensions: institutional, communitarian-cultural and spiritual. The actor may be part of the nucleus or the periphery in each of those dimensions, and the positions are not frozen. The actor might dwell in the nucleus at one moment and in the periphery at another.

Nuclear actors are those who perform the *lubavitcher* character and have a relationship with the institution, usually a labor relationship. Rabbis and *shluchim* (emissaries, or outreach agents) who head *Batei Chabad* (Chabad Houses) are nuclear members, as well as teachers and everybody who works in *Chabad Lubavitch* and performs the *lubavitcher* character. Plenty of people work in *Chabad* but are not recognized as *lubavitchers* because of their physical appearance. *Lubavitchers* have a particular style of dress; for example, the *lubavitcher* hat is not the same as the hats worn by other orthodox Jews. The *lubavitchers* do not use *payos* (long side locks), as Satmar Hasidim do. In the communitarian-cultural dimension, therefore, *lubavitchers* are defined by the degree of reproduction of identity markers. The way they dress and eat, the schools their children attend, the person they married – all are signs for others to identify and recognize someone as a *lubavitcher*. The higher the degree of identity markers an actor reproduces, the closer he is to the nucleus.

Being part of the nucleus of this dimension does not mean the actor is institutionalized. Plenty of *lubavitchers* have no relationship with the institutional frame. They are not institutionally recognized as *shluchim*, but they may serve the same function outside the frames and control of the

institution. For instance, a *lubavitcher* who works in his own cloth factory is not an institutionalized *sheliach*, because he does not run a *Beit Chabad*. But since he puts *tefillin* (phylacteries, or prayer boxes) on the Jewish costumers, he is seen as such.

The distance between institutional and non-institutional *shlichut* allows a young *lubavitcher* to construct his identity outside the frames of the institution. From his point of view, he can be a *sheliach* of the *Rebe* without belonging to the group of *shlulchim* headed by the Director of Chabad Argentina. This shows us how identity markers might be reproduced outside the institutional frame. Sometimes the social actor needs to reassert his identity through the cultural dimension and not the institutional one, resulting in a freedom that may be lacking in the institutional dimension.

Finally, the spiritual dimension is a universe of meanings that gives sense to *lubavitcher* identity. Tensions can arise between the spiritual and institutional/communitarian-cultural dimensions. Someone recognized as a nuclear actor in the communitarian-cultural dimension may be peripheral in the spiritual one. *Lubavitchers* themselves say that many people wear the beard and hat but are not true *lubavitchers* because they are more concerned with these accouterments than with changing the world. For example, one day a *lubavitcher* announced that he was going to head a *Beit Chabad* in the greater Buenos Aires area, where there were no orthodox Jews at all. Living far from the communitarian space was not seen as a danger; on the contrary, this could protect him from becoming preoccupied with matters such as the beard and hat, that is, the communitarian-cultural dimension. Instead, he would be able to develop a more spiritual side of his identity, saving Jews from mixed marriage, for example. The markers that define the spiritual dimension are not as clear as the ones that define the other dimensions. It is only in the interactional process that they become apparent. This dimension is important not because of the possibility for the *lubavitcher* to reach the spiritual level, but because of the tensions with the other dimensions and the impact on how the *lubavitcher* looks at himself.

These dimensions have been useful for analyzing the identity making processes in *Chabad Lubavitch*. In other communities, new dimensions could emerge. The distinction between nucleus and periphery, and the understanding that an actor may be in the nucleus and periphery at the same time, can be applied to research on different communities. The identity space this approach allows us to imagine is, I think, more useful than one based on notions of affiliated or unaffiliated.