Book Prospectus

**Critiques of Theology**

Yotam Hotam

The Bucerius Institute for Contemporary German History and Society, The Haifa Center for German and European Studies and The Faculty of Education, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, ISRAEL yhotam@gmail.com

**1. Brief Description**

This book offers an unexpected account of the relations of critique to theology as manifested in selected and previously less discussed writings of four influential twentieth century German-Jewish thinkers: Sigmund Freud and his book “Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious” published in 1905; Walter Benjamin and his early writings on youth (*Jugend*) composed between 1910-1917; Theodor Adorno’s addresses on education in the decade spanning 1959-1969; and Hannah Arendt’s concept of tradition as displayed in her political writings from the 1960s.

It seems hard to imagine a concept more significant to modern Western thought than that of critique. Particularly in the wake of the Enlightenment, critique came to denote not only a method of investigation, a form of understanding social constructs and historical processes or a central facet in the development of social sciences. As a tool of reason, it was also perceived – to quote Talal Assad’s compelling depiction – as “the essence of secular heroism.” The book nonetheless argues that there is a common denominator in the work of these four intellectuals pertaining to the dialogue between critique and theology – even if it surfaces in different forms, within different intellectual disciplines, and different social-political contexts of the first and latter halves of the twentieth century. Rather than pointing to the separating between modern-secular critique and religious traditions the book pivotally shows that at least with regard to this particular body of thought, there are in fact intricate links between them.

We are dealing here then with a puzzling contradiction. On the one hand, these thinkers were modern, decidedly secular thinkers. Not one of them was in any way religious, nor even sympathetic to religious ways of life. They indeed saw critique as epitomizing the “essence of secular heroism” which features in their work in two main ways: the first as an analysis of concepts, the second as a means to interpret and thus examine social, historical, and political questions so as to offer critical accounts of modernity that addresses generally human as well as specifically Jewish concerns. On the other hand, based on a close reading of the selected texts the book shows that critique operates in the work of these modern Jewish thinkers in a way that is conscious of theology, often finding its expression within a predominantly religious frame of reference. The examination of selected texts across the century is important for I aim to show how – to use a musical metaphor – we are dealing here with a great intellectual symphony on the critique of a secular-modern world in crisis, whose overtones have always resonated with religion and theology. Touching upon Jewish and Christian theological traditions twentieth century modern and secular critique seems to present a much richer, and perhaps more compound phenomenon than previously assumed.

Within this conceptual framework, the book asks (a) what does critique denote for each of the thinkers in question (b) what religious or theological traditions inform each thinker’s thought and (c) what are the ways in which critique, religion, and theology intertwine. Each of the four chapters of the book is therefore dedicated to one thinker. Focusing either on one particular text or on a cluster of works, each chapter offers an analysis of how the thinker in question forged manifold interrelations between critique and theology.

I draw upon the concept of a “critique of theology” to capture the intersection of critique and theology in these thinkers’ works. By using this term, I wish not only to introduce the critical positions of these secular thinkers toward religion and theology. Rather I aim to demonstrate how their critical stance concurrently emerges out of theological traditions and can in many ways be traced back to them. A critique of theology is therefore distinct from political theology. It does not focus on the emergence of modern political concepts, but somewhat more broadly, on what emerges from the interaction between the concepts of critique and theology, which may extend, but is not limited to, political categories.

**2. Contributions**

Discussing these selected scholars in term of *critiques of theology* was not yet suggested by other works in the field. One important contribution of such an approach lies in contesting a more common separation between the two concepts. Rather than highlighting the contrast or disconnect between modern and secular critique and religion, this book wishes to trace the connection between them. In lieu of treating critique as a testament to the disengagement from religion and religiosity, this book seeks to identify how the work of these prominent secular thinkers, differing in so many ways from one another, gives expression to the complex relations of critique to its theological origins.

Another contribution lies in offering also a new combination for the ongoing discussions surrounding the examined thinkers’ relationships to everything theological. Freud’s animosity toward religion which he regarded as a delusion, as well as his self-perception as an “infidel Jew” (*ungläubiger Jude*), are well-known and received considerable scholarly attention. Similarly, Hannah Arendt is commonly regarded as the “most secular” thinker of her generation. Many scholars see “critical theory” thinkers (a term that includes Benjamin and prominently features Adorno) as participating in a progressive-enlightenment-secular project with debatable relations to theology. In contrast, the book argues that it is nevertheless possible to identify links between critique and theological ideas in some of their selected writings. This is not to disregard the wide differences between them. Precisely because of the generational, historical, and disciplinary divergence between these thinkers, examining them alongside one another highlights the significance of the shared theological elements in their concept of critique.

Finally, the selection of texts for analysis presents an additional novelty. The importance of the selected texts lies in offering a unique insight into the relations between critique and theology that was not yet studied by other works. All the texts discussed (Freud’s book on jokes, Benjamin’s early writings, Adorno’s oral and written lectures on education, and Arendt’s political writings) have remained relatively less central in other scholarly investigations, with the additional implication that none of them have, to date, been read alongside one another. The book innovatively suggests how these specific texts and themes (jokes in the case of Freud, Benjamin’s youth, education for Adorno and Arendt’s conceptualization of tradition), offer a rich and substantive content for gaining new knowledge about some of the most intimate operations of a modern secular Jewish thought and its fascinating engagement with religion and theology.

The book falls well with the Chicago UP series “Studies in German-Jewish Cultural History and literature” continues engagement with question of modern secular thought and religion, critique and theology, faith and identity. In its specific discussion of Freud’s theology, the book also dovetails with Eric Santner’s pioneering examination of Freud’s theology (*On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig,* 2011). In its engagement with Adorno’s works from the 1960s it is in dialogue with Martin Shuster, Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity (2014). By arguing for the fundamental position of theology in critique the book also supplements Otfried Höffe recent analysis of the centrality of freedom in critique (*Critique of Freedom*, 2020). In its bringing together of modern discussions and theological and religious traditions, the book also compliments Robert Catalano’s similar association between modern philosophy and Christian theology (*The Saint and the Atheist: Thomas Aquinas and Jean-Paul Sartre*, 2020).

**3. Detailed synopsis and chapter headings**

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**Chapter II. A Theory of Youth**

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*Radical Transcendence*

**Epilogue**

**The introduction** acquaints readers with the theoretical and methodological questions engaged with throughout the book. The chapter opens with a discussion of the concept of critique and its importance to modern thought. In particularly focusing on Kant’s reiteration of Aquinas’ “philosophy is the handmaid of theology” (*philosophia ancilla theologiae*), the book presents how critique’s handmaid’s tale is not about its utter separation from theology but rather about its ongoing relations with its theological “other.” Drawing on this discussion, the introduction elaborates on the concept of critique of theology and explains its analytic and methodological significance. It then provides an overview of the book’s arguments concerning the type of critique of theology that each of the German-Jewish scholars under discussion puts on display, including also an explanation for the selection of these thinkers and of their specific texts.

**Chapter 1** demonstrates how Freud’s 1905 book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* offers a critique of the law that is informed by theology. The first section of the chapter is dedicated to a contextualization of Freud’s interest in questions of law and lawgiving that he associates with religion and theology in these early years. Against this broad background, the second section examines Freud’s analysis of jokes (*Witze*). I show how the common denominator of all jokes is that they offer social critique, and how such a critique embedded in jokes attests to Freud’s recourse to a notion of “law.” In jokes critique and law are thus interwoven to the extent of offering a critique of the law. The third section finalizes the discussion by pointing to the theological underpinning of Freud’s critique of the law, showing how it echoes traditional Jewish halachic discussions relating to the divine law. A critique of the law is in such a way informed by theology. With respect to this last point I demonstrate how the relations between critique and law embedded in jokes point to a critique of theology for they secularize theological concepts on which they are based.

C**hapter 2** presents Walter Benjamin’s theory of youth as a form of critique of theology in that it offers social criticism of mystical lore. In the first section of the chapter I present a short overview of the centrality of youth for the young Benjamin, followed by an underlining of the theological aspects that Benjamin ascribes to the concept. In the second part of the chapter I examine how Benjamin’s theological understanding of youth gives expression to Christian mysticism, such as that of Meister Eckhart. In particular, it is the divine “nothingness”, central to the mystical tradition, that Benjamin does not only relate to but also connects with his approach to messianism. In the third section I point to the manner in which Benjamin’s mystical articulation of youth informs his social and political critique from these early years. This will point to how critique of theology denotes also in Benjamin’s case a secularization of theology, for it reframes transcendence within independent human experience in the world. I then examine how Benjamin’s theological criticism informs his attitude towards Jewish assimilation and nationalism. In tying politics and theology together I demonstrate how social criticism of mystical lore accentuates a messianic expectation that to Benjamin can only be fulfilled inasmuch as it remains unfulfilled.

**Chapter 3** argues that Adorno’s postwar perspectives on education – broadly, and somewhat loosely regarded by him as the arena of human cultivation – constitutes a site for charting his critique of theology “after Auschwitz.” In the first section of the chapter I illustrate how critique for Adorno remains always depended of theology. Critique of theology means in this context that critique is defined as a secularization of theological concepts that is meant, however, to “rescue” these concepts. The second section of the chapter presents how a transformation of the modern German educational tradition of *Bildung* into *Halbbildung* (which may be understood also as “pseudo-education”) epitomizes for Adorno a distortion of this “rescue” mission of critique. As such a distortion, *Halbbildung* reflects a total “entrapment” of human beings in the existing, overwhelmingly oppressive, modern social and for Adorno mechanized conditions. But if education is the arena of oppression, it also presents for Adorno the showground for liberation – a liberation from the machine. I conclude the discussion by presenting two main critical-theological areas in which such a possible deliverance *ex machina* is disclosed by Adorno. The first relates to how an education for “critical self-reflection” is still endowed with the mission of rescuing theology, and how such a mission discloses Adorno’s appeal for a negative critique of theology. Negativity here means that critique can only fulfil its theological calling by not fulfilling it which translates into a possibility of representing the divine only by means of its non-representation. The second area appertains to Adorno’s discussion of love in the context of education. I show how love is central to Adorno’s formation of a critical education that battles against the indifference to the suffering of human beings and how it is largely articulated by him as a theological response to the “failure” of Kierkegaard’s theological doctrine which Adorno discussed in his 1939 article “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love.”

**Chapter 4** underlines Arendt’s critique of a “crisis” of modernity and its roots in the the Roman tripartite theological tradition (constituted by a division between political theology, physical or philosophical theology and mythical theology). In the first section I point to the manner in which tradition is for Arendt a Roman religious concept, pertaining to a Roman tripartite theology. It is this tradition that, according to Arendt, Augustine absorbed into his own “hierarchy” of love. In the next section of this chapter I discuss how the Roman-Augustinian theology endows Arendt’s critical analysis of a “crisis” of modernity with a basis. Here I argue that such a theological tradition provides the basis not only to Arendt’s argument regarding what modernity had lost, but more profoundly to her critical analysis of such a loss. In such a way Arendt presents a critique that is depended of theology to the extent of offering another version of a critique of theology. In the last section of the chapter I bring such an understanding of Arendt’s critique of theology to bear on her discussions of secularization and secularism, evil, and messianism, central to her writings in the 1960s. Secularization implies not only the ongoing erosion of Christian dogma in public life, but also, and somewhat antithetically, a modern return to the Roman tradition (as in, for example, the context of the modern revolutions). Evil and messianism also underline, albeit in widely different ways, how the Roman theological tradition informs her preference for a “banal” (and for Arendt anti-gnostic) rather than “radical” approach to the question of transcendence.

**The epilogue** is designed to weave together the book’s engagement with the four different critiques of theology. Touching upon Jewish and Christian traditions, worldly and divine law, mysticism, negative theology, and tripartite theology, critique seems to denote a rich and composite phenomenon. Extrapolating beyond these specific cases, and taking today’s return of religion and religiosity to the forefront of our social and political reality, the epilogue reflects on modern critique’s focus on the immanent world, the type of “secular theology” that it puts on display. Discussed also is the modern Jewish intellectual legacy made of an ongoing tension between different perspectives and traditions of thought, that may perhaps serve as a basis for a fruitful conversation between them (as opposed to antagonism and struggle) provided that neither demands exclusivity in all matters human.

**3. Status of the Work**

I have completed drafting the book’s introduction and four main chapters and I intend to finish writing the epilogue and to review the entire text (including with professional editing) by January 2021. An early version of my reflections on Benjamin’s theory of youth was published 2019 in Sophia (vol. 58, pp. 175-195).

**4. Potential Audience and Market**

I expect this book to draw the attention of scholars interested in modern Jewish culture, history, philosophy and literature, who are especially attentive to the interplay of modern Jewish history and European history, Jewish thought and its complex relations with the tradition of the enlightenment. The book will also appeal to academic specialists and students in the fields of Jewish studies, modern history and philosophy, European history, religious studies, theology, political science, German Studies, education and continental philosophy. My book will benefit from the growing scholarly interest in the relations between secularism and religion, politics and theology, messianism and modern social and political imagination. It may also be relevant to the general academic public in Europe and the US, which finds interest in questions relating to the relations between secular-modernity, religion and theology.

**5. Competing and Comparable Books**

I am unaware of any book that might directly compete with *Critiques of Theology.* The book, however, is in conversation with the growing volume of works interested in the role of religion and theology in modern German-Jewish experience and thought (for example: Orr Scharf, *Thinking in Translation: Scriptures and Redemption in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig* (2019); Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent.* (2019); Vivian Liska, [*German-Jewish Thought and its Afterlife: a Tenuous Legacy (*](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA21137804450002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110)2017); David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (2011); Pierre Bouretz, [*Witnesses for the Future: Philosophy and Messianism* (2010)](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2177366410002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110)). To this volume of works my book adds a much-needed analysis of four thinkers who, have not, to date, been approached together by considering the relations between critique and theology in their work. In bringing together diverse critiques of theology from across the century my book also compliments the scholarly ongoing focus on the Jewish experience in the Weimar era (for example: David Marshall, *The Weimar Origins of Rhetorical Inquiry* (2020); Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (2008); Kerry Wallach, [*Passing illusion: Jewish visibility in Weimar Germany*](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA21140265550002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110)2017; Peter Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy.* (2003)). Rather than focusing on a Weimarian chapter, I present the vicissitudes of theology across the century.

Closer books to this project are scholarly explorations of the role of religion and theology in the writings of each of the scholars under discussion. My book clearly relates to Eric Santner groundbreaking approach to Freud’s theology (*On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (2011)). The book, however, uniquely shows how Freud’s construction of “transcendence within immanence” was already developed in his early work on jokes that is not central to Santner’s study. In particularly exploring the naissance of Freud’s interest in questions of law and lawgiving, my work also adds a significant phase that is missing in other studies, targeting mainly Freud’s last publication Moses and Monotheism (most notably Yossef Haif Yerushalmi’s , *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1993); Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997); [Gilad Sharvit and Karen S. Feldman](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA51211818630002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110)’s collection of essays *Freud and Monotheism: Moses and the Violent Origins of Religion* (2018)). My association of Freud’s recourse to the notion of the “law” with the Rabbinic Halachic vocabulary and theological imagination is also clearly different from the recent studies of William Parson, [*Freud and Augustine in Dialogue: Psychoanalysis, Mysticism, and the Culture of Modern Spirituality*](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2177078780002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=sub,contains,Freud,AND&facet=lang,include,eng&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=0) (2013) and Joseph H. Berke, *The Hidden Freud: His Hassidic Roots* (2015)), who argue for the influence of Jewish (Berke) and Christian (Parson) mysticism on Freud’s psychoanalysis. The pointing to the relations between wit and law and displaying its critical-theological underpinning also marks a clear conceptual innovation in relation to the small volume of works focusing on or relating to Freud’s theory of jokes (for example Elliot Oring’s, *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity* (1984) and the recent Ruth R. Wisse, [*No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*. (2013](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA51132823650002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110))).

There is a wide range of recent explorations of Benjamin’s theology and messianism. To take only few examples: Colby Dickinson and [Stéphane Symons](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA51134743560002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110) collection of essays, *Walter Benjamin and Theology* (2016); Levine Michael G, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan* (2014); [Stéphane Symons](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA51134743560002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110), *Walter Benjamin: Presence of Mind, Failure to Comprehend* (2013); Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (2011); Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane* (2003); Margarete Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin: Self –Reference and Religiosity,* (2002)). None of these works, however, focuses on Benjamin’s writings between 1910-1917, or provides an in-depth analysis of his theory of youth. Johannes Steinzinger’s *Zwischen emanzipatorischem Appell und melancholischem Verstummen Walter Benjamins Jugendschriften* (2011) and *Revolte Eros und Sprache* (2013) are among a few offering such an in-depth examination. These studies nonetheless are available only in German, they do not focus on Benjamin’s theological imagination and they argue for the theory’s minor importance for the understanding of Benjamin’s later works. My book challenges such a marginalization by being the first to show how Benjamin’s theory of youth offers social criticism of mystical lore, vital to the understanding of his later writings.

My book is also comparable to topical accounts of Adorno’s theology (for example Gerhard Richter, *Thinking with Adorno: The Uncoercive Gaze* (2019); Peter Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (2016); Wolfson Eliot R., *Poetic Thinking* (2015); Christopher Craig Brittain, *Adorno and Theology* (2010); Hent de Vries, Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas (2005)). These and many other books offer vital insights into several domains of Adorno’s negative theology (for example Gordon, Richter), his engagement with the mystical Jewish “passion for the impossible” (Wolfsohn) or his dependency on the theological “other” of reason (de Vries). My book compliments these readings into Adorno’s theology by bringing to light Adorno’s postwar approach to education and its displaying of a critique of theology that were not yet suggested by other works. It also offers of a unique vista not found in these works of Adorno’s “negative theology” denoting how, in the context of education, such negativity relates not to an inability to represent the divine (the so called *Bilderverbot*) but rather to a possibility of representation by means of its non-representation.

None of the recent studies who argue for a residual theological vocabulary in Arendt’s thought (for example: Trevor Tchir, *Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action: Daimonic Disclosure of the ‘Who'* (2017); John Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology* (2016)) discuss Arendt’s concept of tradition. The accentuation of Arendt’s concept of tradition and its relations to her critique of modernity also presents a new angle to Arendt’s political writings that remains somewhat underrepresented in Dana Villa’s Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt (2000). The book also contests a widely accepted view of Arendt as an “anti-modernist” (for example Maurizio D’Entrèves *Modernity and the Human Condition: Hannah Arendt’s Conception of Modernity* (1991)) by demonstrating how Arendt’s bringing together of critique and theology cannot be easily assigned to any one-sided classification. Different from Peter Gordon (“The Concept of the Apolitical: German Jewish Thought and Weimar Political Theology” (2007)) and in dialogue with Samuel Moyn (“Hannah Arendt on the Secular” (2008)) my book shows the manner in which the “political theological predicament” was also relevant to Arendt. The book is also distinctive in suggesting that a reading of Arendt as a “post-Christian” thinker (Julia Kristeva, *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words – Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Gabrielle Colette; A Trilogy,* (2001)) should be regarded as indicating Arendt’s return to the Roman sources of Christianity. In addition, the book compliments Rebecca Dew’s *Hannah Arendt: Between Ideologies* (2020). Dew’s book mainly examines Arendt’s relations with her mentors Heidegger and Jaspers. Somewhat differently, my book points to her debt to a “Roman” Augustine that reflects back on her intellectual relations with these two sources of her thought.

**6. Author Profile**

Yotam Hotam is currently a fellow of the Bucerius Institute for Contemporary German History and Society, and the Haifa Center for German and European Studies, and he is a senior lecturer (associate professor) at the Faculty of Education at the University of Haifa. He was a Horace W. Goldsmith Visiting Professor in Judaic Studies at Yale (2015), an honorary fellow of the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University (2016), and a visiting Mosse Professor at the UW-Madison and a Fulbright scholarship holder (2005-2006). He is a member of the academic committee of the Israeli Resling Press, as well as a number of Israeli academic journals. Between the years 2008-2012 he served as the editor of the Hebrew peer-reviewed Journal "Tabur: A Yearbook for European History, Culture, Society and Thought", published by the R. Koebner Center for German History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was also a fellow of the Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center for German-Jewish Literature and Cultural History (2006-2008). He served as a research fellow in the special research group "Erinnerungskulturn" (2000-2005), located at the university of Giessen, as well as in the research group "Sport, Body, Subject" (2009-2011) of the "German Research Society" (DFG).