

**KLEZMER  
AMERICA:  
JEWISHNESS,  
ETHNICITY,  
MODERNITY**  
BY JONATHAN FREEDMAN

Columbia University Press, 2008,  
£20.50

Review by  
Keith Kahn-Harris

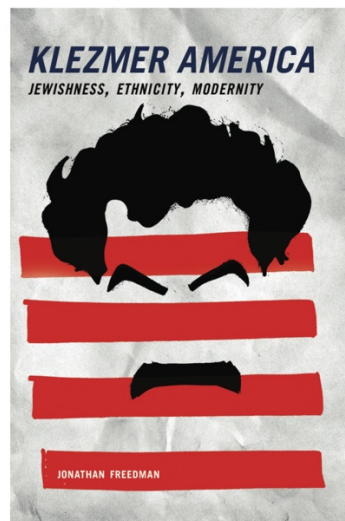
Despite the title, this is not a book about klezmer, at least not in the conventional sense. That's not to say that klezmer isn't discussed in it, but it is part of a wider discussion of the problematics and potentials of Jewish culture in America.

The author, a professor of English and American studies at the University of Michigan, is interested in how 'dealing with the collective fictions that accrete around the examples of Jews, Jewishness and Judaism can unsettle even the most seemingly secure of the seemingly calcified categories by which our culture parses otherness'. For those not used to the language of academic cultural studies, this sentence may seem a little intimidating, but there are riches in *Klezmer America* that await the patient reader. In this collection of linked essays Freedman looks at a host of case studies in his examination of how 'Jews, Jewishness and Judaism' subvert and throw light on the seemingly intractable structures of race and ethnicity in America.

Klezmer's totemic significance lies in its 'relentless and definitional hybridity' and its 'ceaseless and even foundational revisionism', which challenge notions of fixed ethnic and racial boundaries. In the work of artists such as the Klezmatics and John Zorn, Freedman finds 'a tradition of dynamic innovation wrought in the encounter between Jewish and gentile cultures that has the property of reanimating both, creating in this interplay new configurations of ethnic belonging'. This celebratory tone is

striking. Indeed, Freedman concludes the book by arguing that we are witnessing 'a kind of renaissance that ushers into being new forms of Jewish cultural production by a generation that's free from much of the baggage weighing down their elders'. Klezmer is at the vanguard of contemporary Jewish culture's reconfiguration of the stultifying structures of race and ethnicity in America. Freedman finds this reconfiguration at work within a host of Jewish cultural phenomena including the work of Sacha Baron-Cohen, Tony Kushner's play *Angels In America*, the music of Uri Caine and the novels of Philip Roth.

At the same time, Freedman is not just interested in highlighting the radical possibilities of Jewish cultural production, he builds a version of cultural analysis that uses the prism



of Jewishness to illuminate the wider dynamics of race and ethnicity in America. His dissection of topics as various as the marriage of Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe, Marrano and Converso literature and the relationship between Jews and Asian Americans, open up fascinating new perspectives on the complexities of American multiculturalism. For me the most scintillating chapter in the book is the one which analyses the immensely popular *Left Behind* series of Christian thrillers. The series, which uses the Tom Clancy-style techno-thriller idiom to depict

the apocalyptic sequence of Rapture, Tribulation and Second Coming, is noteworthy for eschewing the overt anti-Semitism common in previous Christian apocalyptic works. Yet at the same time, Freedman shows how anti-Semitic discourses persist, albeit weirdly denuded of their Jewish content.

Despite the bravura analyses on offer in this book, I couldn't help but have some reservations. While Freedman demonstrates how a consideration of Jewish issues can open up seemingly intractable questions of race and ethnicity, I wondered whether Jews, Jewishness and Judaism were anything more than a heuristic device, a tool to think with. There is a disconnection in *Klezmer America* from everyday lived experiences of Jews in the United States that occur outside of the realm of cultural production. It is unclear what Jews, Jewishness and Judaism actually *are* for Freedman beyond a productive collection of cultural resources.

What is missing from this book is any kind of 'thick' description of Jewish lives as they are lived in all their diversity. In particular, the practices of the organised, mainstream Jewish community are either ignored, dismissed or treated as a starting point for more productive cultural explorations. Even if one feels that the mainstream Jewish community is too conservative to do anything but maintain old modes of thinking and practice, if the exciting new modes of Jewish cultural production and criticism that Freedman talks about are to be truly transformative they need to engage with that community.

It is in the interaction of mainstream and more critical modes of cultural production that the most urgent analytical questions are raised. For instance: What happens when klezmer circulates outside the realm of radical Jewish culture and into the world of synagogues, barmitzvahs, weddings and JCCs? What happens when the institutions of the mainstream Jewish community begin to discover, sponsor and incorporate critical forms of Jewish culture? Freedman's book, while immensely thought-provoking, limits itself by its neglect of such questions.