JEWISH AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCY:
LATIN AMERICA IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE*

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This chapter discusses some aspects of the political, socioeconomic and demographic infrastructure underlying the development of Jewish culture and identification in contemporary society. While mainly oriented toward understanding the constraints and opportunities that may limit or stimulate the development of Jewish associative life at the global level, we illustrate the more general issues through some examples concerning Jews in the Latin American context.

Global Dependency

Major Patterns and Trends

In its simplest descriptive definition, globalization is a process of growing integration at the world level of international political and military interactions, socioeconomic development and transactions, and not less significantly, cultural patterns and communication networks (Wallerstein, 1991; Waters, 1995; Kurtz, 1995; Bauman, 1998). Over the last decades of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, globalization processes have significantly stepped up. Events of planetary salience, or in any case significantly transcending a local scope, included the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Soviet Union as a major global power; the reunion of Germany; the expansion of the European Union and its monetary union; major waves of international migration; the revival of religious fundamentalism, particularly Islam following Khomeini’s Iranian revolution; in part related to

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the latter, September 11 and the global spread of terrorism; the return of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Europe and Africa; the growing U.S. military involvement in the Middle East; the beginning, stoppage and collapse of a peace process in the Middle East; the Catholic Church’s improvement of its relationship to the Jewish people and its recognition of the State of Israel; China’s growing role in international economy; but also the rise of cyberspace, scientific breakthroughs such as the genome project, and other widespread cultural and behavioral changes.

These and other transformations of the basic political, economic, cognitive and normative systems continuously, deeply and rapidly affect the daily life, identity and boundary definition of nations, communities, and individuals worldwide. Through a chain of direct and indirect influences, the same and additional factors deeply transform the established patterns of existence of Jewish communities globally and locally (DellaPergola, Rebhun and Tolts, 2005).

In each of these general instances, one or more major centers of influence guide and often impose the main patterns of transformation, innovation, and eventually hierarchy within the global system in the more diverse spheres of military power, politics, economy, and culture. Other areas in the world system may enjoy some amount of autonomy and self-direction vis-à-vis these trends. Still more areas stand in a position of near total dependency from decisions, trends, ideas and resources generated elsewhere in the system.

One important implication of these trends is that three interrelated types of processes affect the Jewish experience in general and in specific locales making it dependent on (if not prisoner of) powerful external forces. These processes:

- At the global level, determine the changing mutual position of regional societies in the worldwide context.
- At the continental level, determine the changing mutual position of individual countries and organized socioeconomic and cultural groups.
- At the Jewish collective level, sometimes described as ‘a self-organizing system’ (DellaPergola and Gilboa, 2005e), determine the relevance, the mode of interaction and the nature of discourse between Jews and the surrounding environment, and among Jewish individuals and institutions.