

## Proposal for EAJS 2018

**Submission title:** A “postcolonial” reading of Neolog Judaism in Hungary

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**Section:** either: 9. *Contemporary Jewish History* [probably first choice]  
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or: 17. *Jewish History in Central-Eastern Europe*

### Abstract (299 words):

Neolog Judaism, the Hungarian offshoot of positive-historical Judaism in the nineteenth century and the dominant non-orthodox denomination since then, has witnessed a renewed discussion about its definition in recent years. Is it moderate reform or liberal orthodoxy? Should it follow the changes in the conservative/masorti movement, or should it remain a Hungarian specialty?

As a contribution to this debate, I shall offer a “postcolonial” approach. Susannah Heschel (1998, 1999), Ran HaCohen (2010) and others have suggested to study the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Germany through the lens of postcolonial theory, best described as “a set of conceptual resources”. Thus, the concept of “internal colony” might apply to nineteenth century German Jewry, shedding new light both on the Christian discourse on Jews, and on the Jewish discourse on themselves.

Their argument also works for Hungary. Neolog discourse shall be compared to the “slaves’ viewpoint”, who on the one hand are “imprisoned within their master’s discourse about them”, but who also develop the perspective of the marginalized. How are real or perceived power relations mirrored in these discourses and behavioural patterns? The proposed “postcolonial narrative” of Neolog Judaism retells nineteenth century modernization, acculturation and religious reform within this conceptual framework.

More than a stylistic exercise, the approach bears fruit when we turn to the consequences of “decolonisation” in the twentieth century. Hence, the voices in the contemporary debate on Neolog Judaism, both within and without, are best interpreted as various perspectives on the “colonial past”. The “anti-conquest” narrative of the Chabad historian can be translated as the Neolog movement having excessively surrendered themselves to the “colonizers”, and so he calls for what we may describe as “radical mental decolonization”. Contrary to him, members and sympathizers of Neolog Judaism develop different forms of “postcolonial identity” that keep more values of the “colonizers”.