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Reviewed by Cornelia Aust

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Jewish History Encounters Economy

For several decades – from roughly the end of World War II until recently – scholars of Jewish history devoted scant attention to economic issues, despite the fact that Jews' commercial activities had been a subject of great concern to many Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The international workshop *Jewish History Encounters Economy*, which was organized by Gideon Reuveni and sponsored by the George L. Mosse Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, sought to place economic issues once again at the center of Jewish history and even called for an *“economic turn”* in Jewish studies.

In his introductory remarks, Reuveni (University of Madison-Wisconsin) showed that economic issues aroused a great deal of interest in the nineteenth century among Jews who were concerned with the emergence and meaning of capitalism. This was even more the case at the beginning of the twentieth century, when many Jews responded to the economic theories of Max Weber and Werner Sombart which ascribed Jews a special role in the emergence of capitalism and economic modernity. Yet, according to Reuveni, economic issues became marginal to postwar Jewish historiography – although a number of scholars, many of them relatively young, have recently begun to return to the economy and reexamine its crucial role in Jewish history. Reuveni then called for Jewish historians to engage not only with issues of production, distribution, and consumption but also with business networks and the development of trust, in order to demonstrate how Jewish identity has been embedded in broader social and economic realms.

In the workshop's keynote address, Derek Penslar (University of Toronto) followed a similar line of argumentation and provided an overview and analysis of the historiography on economic issues in Jewish history. While the *“Wissenschaft des Judentums”* – the nineteenth-century German-Jewish movement that developed a systematic, scholarly approach to Judaism – mostly shied away from economic history, many Jewish historians in interwar Eastern Europe became interested in economic matters, in many cases from a Zionist perspective. However, after the Second World War, economic approaches waned, and the question of a Jewish *homo economicus* became taboo. Consequently, social and cultural historians often considered phenomena such as class in cultural rather than in economic terms. Penslar also noted that many important works that opened up economic perspectives on the Jewish past were written by scholars who were not trained specialists in Jewish history, but rather historians who worked on Jews within European social and cultural history and who thus brought fresh methodological insights into the field of Jewish history. Such a list includes: Natalie Zemon Davis, Jonathan Israel, and most recently, Yuri Slezkine. Nevertheless, economic issues remain on the fringes of Jewish history, which motivated Penslar to call for an *“economic turn”* in Jewish studies. In general, Penslar (and other participants) noted that economic history and matters of economic power are increasingly neglected in history departments today, even as many departments of economics remove economic history from their curricula.

Although Penslar noted that in recent years early modernists were more likely to focus on the economy than late modernists, only the first panel, entitled "Economy and Cultural Exchange," dealt with the period before the early nineteenth century. In his paper, Adam Teller (University of Haifa) discussed and critiqued the middlemen theory, an influential model for the conceiving of the economic position of Jews in early modern Poland-Lithuania. Developed in the 1940s and fashionable from the 1970s into the 1990s, this theory describes the tendency of immigrants or immigrant groups to inhabit particular economic niches that are ethnically bound and which often include high risk business activities. (Chinese immigrants in Indonesia and other parts of South Asia and Indians in twentieth-century South Africa are other examples of such groups.) Teller claimed middlemen theory is too general to accurately describe the concrete historical situation of the Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, who, he argued, were integrated into the Polish political and economic systems, and who occupied a place as clearly defined as an estate in a hierarchical feudal system. Not only did economic contacts imply cultural transfer — such as the attempts of Jews to copy the nobles' lifestyle — but ethnic solidarity was often limited, as illustrated by the great number of regulations that sought to limit competition among Jewish merchants. To depict Polish Jews solely as middlemen would mean, according to Teller, overlooking the deep influence that economic contacts had on cultural and religious matters.

While Teller questioned the value of the middlemen theory, Susanne Bennewitz (University of Basel) presented a case study of "real" middlemen in Basel. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the business of *shmoozers* [brokers] developed in the broad area between Switzerland and the French Alsace. This practice consisted of offering middleman services for wholesale and retail business, money and bills of exchange, and marriages. Though accusations against the *shmoozers* never disappeared, and some sources betray an ambivalent popular perception, the business was widely accepted around 1815 in public as well as in court.

In the panel's third paper, Jonathan Karp (State University of New York at Binghamton) recalled that amid all the discussion of Jews' role in the rise of modern capitalism, we often forget that Jews were also characterized as distinctively backward and bound to the feudal system, as in the case of the representation of Jews in eighteenth-century Alsace. Fichte, Marx and even Weber linked Jewish economic occupations to the nobility and

thus regarded Jews' economic role as reactionary. Yet, Karp did not propose substituting the image of the Jew as economically backward for the portrayal of Jews as economic modernizers. He urged, rather, that we appreciate the complexities and ambiguities in the economic position of Jews in early modern Europe.

On the second day, the presentations were equally divided between theoretical treatments of Jews and the economy and more empirical case studies of Jews' commercial activities. In the panel "Thinking in Economic Terms about Jews," Grit Schorch (University of Leipzig) dealt with the attitudes toward the economy in the writings of Moses Mendelssohn, a surprisingly unexamined topic among scholars of the Berlin Haskalah. In his thoughts on economics, Mendelssohn, in many respects, followed Menasseh ben Israel in conceiving of Jews as a useful part of society. Mendelssohn, himself a successful silk manufacturer, in contrast to many of his contemporary thinkers, regarded trade as a useful occupation.

Sharon Gordon (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) explored nineteenth-century connections between economy and conversion. She drew an opposition between conversions which were understood as "essential" and those viewed as "nominal," meaning a formal change of identity without a meaningful religious transformation. Gordon showed how the latter form of conversion was seen by many nineteenth-century observers as a kind of economic act, akin to an exchange of currencies. While Theodor Mommsen argued that Jews had already fulfilled their destiny by transforming barter into a nominal system based on money, and thus no longer had any reason for remaining Jewish, Werner Sombart rejected Jewish conversion to Christianity as opportunistic; significantly, both associated Jewish religious change with economic transformations.

In the panel "Imagining the Homo Economicus Judaicus," Kirill Postoutenko (University of Southern California) also looked at economic metaphors in representations of Jews and Jewishness. Specifically, he analyzed the use of wandering as a kind of circulation in the writings of Dostoevsky and Marx. Both, following different Hegelian traditions, described the Jewish God as abstract — as money represents an abstraction of actual wealth — and equated the historical teleology of Judaism (wandering) with the economic teleology of capitalism (circulation). Yet while Dostoevsky privileged a kind of antimodern nativism and extolled the virtues of rootedness in the soil, Marx emphasized universalism and the value of human labor.

Jerry Z. Muller (The Catholic University of America, Washington) presented a reexamination of the writings of Ber Borochov and Ernest Gellner for their insights on economics and nationalism. Borochov, an early twentieth-century socialist-Zionist, and a once important figure who has drifted into obscurity, portrayed nationalism as a product of capitalistic development. He claimed that the abnormal conditions of production would not lead to class conflict, but rather to conflict between national groups. Muller showed how Gellner's theory of the development of nations and nationalism drew on Borochov in this respect, especially in regard to Eastern Europe. That is, Gellner also grounded the rise of ethnic nationalism in economic developments.

Nicolas Berg (University of Leipzig) then traced the evolution of the term *Luftmensch* [literally: air person or person not grounded] and its varying associations with Jews. He argued that while the term was originally used by people such as Max Nordau in the nineteenth century to describe Jews who were excluded from gainful employment, it became increasingly accepted as a description of assimilated Western European Jews. Berg claimed that *Luftmensch* referred less and less to socio-economic categories, and turned into a general critique of Judaism as lacking grounding and balance. It lost its ironic, self-critical implications and took on increasingly sharp anti-Semitic overtones.

Sarah Stein (University of Washington-Seattle) spoke about an international network of Jewish merchants who were active in the trans-Atlantic trade of ostrich feathers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This network was primarily established by Eastern European Jewish immigrants to South Africa after 1880, and Jews soon made up some ninety percent of local and international merchants in the ostrich feather trade. With the case of the ostrich feather trade, Stein demonstrated the interweaving of demographic and occupational patterns among this large immigrant group. On the one hand, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe came to South Africa, London, Paris and North America in large numbers after 1880 and thus could reactivate and use already existing networks. Second, many of these merchants already were involved in fur or textile trade before and so could rely on existing skills. Stein also discussed the fashion of ostrich feather wearing in pre-World War I metropolises and thus linked her analysis of Jewish trade networks to questions of taste and consumption.

Sarah E. Wobick (University of Wisconsin-Madison) turned to the problem of consumption and its mean-

ing for Jewish identity by examining the case of coffeehouses. Here acts of buying and selling cannot only be seen as an economic exchange, since, as Wobick argued, coffeehouses were a social space. Coffeehouse visits by Jews in the early nineteenth century represented an attempt to enter the new bourgeois society and to lay symbolic belonging within this group. Purchasing coffee in a coffeehouse, then, may be seen as the purchase of a social place.

Paul Lerner (University of Southern California) addressed the question of Jews and consumption from a different angle. In his presentation on the Jewish department store in German politics and culture, he examined representations and images of department stores in Germany around the turn of the century, a time when opposition to mass consumption coincided with a new rise of a new kind of anti-Semitism. The images included not only accusations of cheapness and shady business practices, but also allegations of sexual depravity, betraying a discomfort with female desire, especially in light of the fact that women comprised a large percentage of the sales staff and also of the visitors and consumers in the stores.

Michael Miller (Central European University) introduced the example of Moritz Jellinek who played a significant role in the modernization of the Hungarian economy in the nineteenth century. Coming to Pest from Moravia, he quickly became integrated into the new society and saw the economic function of Jews in the Hungarian economy as the fulfillment of patriotic duties. Though rejecting petty trade as most of his contemporaries, Jellinek depicted Jews active in commerce as useful and productive.

In the concluding session, Benjamin Braude (Boston College) sought to broaden the scope of analysis by emphasizing perceptions of Jews' economic role in Ottoman history. He recalled the image of the Sephardic economic superman in the early modern period. In his final remarks, Derek Penslar added that the paradigm of Jews' place in the emergence of capitalism still seems almost unavoidable in Jewish economic history. He also noted that most of the conference papers dealt with representations and perceptions and only several analyzed the actual economic activities of Jews. Penslar also urged consideration of Zionism and the construction of the State of Israel as an economic project and undertaking, a perspective seldom thematized in Jewish studies. Finally, Jonathan Zatzlin (Boston University) stressed two other points in his concluding reflections. First, he called attention to a continuous discourse on Jewish unethical busi-

ness behavior that spanned the premodern and the modern. Second, Zatz called for breaking down the barriers that separate cultural and economic history, since culture and economy are intertwined, mutually constitutive forces.

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