



Merchants, Moneylenders and Idlers

NEW VIEW OF JEWISH HISTORY
OFFERS UNDERSTANDING OF
CAPITALISM, ANTI-SEMITISM

In developed countries today, people argue over the roles and rights of low-skilled foreign laborers. “They’re crucial to our economy,” some maintain. Others say, “We need them, but just as guest workers.” Or: “Kick them out before they drain our economy and destroy our way of life.”



At the Usurers, Edgar Bundy

For hundreds of years, Europeans waged similar debates, but not about the pros and cons of allowing poor immigrants to scrub floors and harvest tomatoes. They argued about the benefits and dangers of allowing Jews to serve in their countries as merchants, moneylenders and other kinds of economic middlemen. Did Jews take those roles because they were at heart a commercial people, or because they weren't allowed any other kind of work? Was capitalism a progressive force or a corrupting one, and what did the growth of a market society imply about the Jews' purported flair for commerce? If a country let Jews run businesses, should it also let them own land and hold political office?

Political thinkers through the years have debated the economic role of Jews. Yet Jews who study Jewish history have long avoided the subject of economics, said Jonathan Karp, associate professor of history and Judaic Studies at Binghamton University. "These historians didn't want to contribute to the stereotype, to the negative image of Jews as merchants or Jews as Shylocks," he said. In the past, when historians did address the subject, they approached it as Marxists and Zionists who hoped to transform Jews into workers and farmers.

However, Karp said, it's impossible to understand the history of anti-Semitism, or of capitalism, without taking a non-



Jonathan Karp

ideological look at political theories on Jewish economics.

Karp does just that in a new book, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638-1848*. Examining writings on politics and economics published throughout the period, he traces evolving ideas about Jews' traditional functions in the economy and, based on those functions, what rights they should have in society.

For example, Simone Luzzatto, a Venetian rabbi and scholar, argued in 1638 that local Jews were willing and able to take on the risks of foreign

trade, keeping control out of the hands of foreign merchants. Although trade might make Venetian Jews wealthy, he said, unlike other alien groups they posed no threat to the state because they wanted no political rights.

In contrast, British writer John Toland argued in 1714 that Jews should be allowed to work in many spheres beyond commerce. Jews were inclined by heritage to make good citizens, he said, and they should be naturalized as British subjects.

In 1781, the Prussian Christian Wilhelm Dohm wrote a book sympathetic toward Jews that used them as a lens through

which to explore capitalism. Dohm felt that a commercial society promised greater equality and freedom, but he also feared that capitalism might undermine traditional values.

Karp's book is significant, in part because he tackles a subject that many scholars have avoided and in part because his research is so broad in scope, said Adam Sutcliffe, lecturer in early modern history at King's College London. "He ambitiously takes on a long period of more than two centuries, straddling the early modern/late modern divide," Sutcliffe said of Karp's book. "This is an important strength of his study, enabling him to provide a deep exploration of



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the roots of the emergence of the more familiar economic associations with Jews in the period since 1848.”

Karp said he focused on the years 1638 to 1848 because that period marks an important transition in thought about the economic roles of Jews. “At the beginning,” he said, “writers and debaters were saying, ‘Sure, bring the Jews in. Let them do their magic. They neither want, nor will we give them, any political rights.’ Jews were a safe bet as long as they remained non-citizens.”

But the French Revolution changed the rules. Under the new order, in many countries, a person who followed local customs and pledged loyalty to the state could become a citizen. In theory, Jews could gain political rights, but not if they still stood apart as a merchant class. “The fact that Jews were anomalous in their occupations was a serious obstacle, in the minds of many statesmen and philosophers, to their acculturation, or their subordination to the discipline of citizenship,” Karp said. Society faced a dilemma: “Either we have to kick them out, or we have to transform them and reform them, so that they’ll no longer be a commercial people.”

That dilemma lasted well beyond the period of the book — in fact, until

the Holocaust. And it’s important to understand the debate, because it points to the fact that anti-Semitism didn’t spring only from religious prejudice or distaste for moneylenders, Karp said. It also grew out of ambivalence toward capitalism.

Because Jews gravitated to commerce, and because people weren’t sure whether commerce was a good or bad force, even when Jews seemed to assimilate, people weren’t sure they could trust them. “They’d say, ‘Aha! They are behaving as Jews, because they are behaving commercially. These people may share our language and culture, but their predominance in commerce shows that they have their own agenda, that they are a fifth column.’” It did not occur to people who thought this way, Karp said, that Jews’ commercial orientation was the result of centuries of habituation and restriction.

For this reason, the focus on traditional roles and stereotypes also makes Jewish economics a perilous area for scholarship today. “It’s very tricky to talk about the subject objectively, without giving perceived ammunition to anti-Semitism,” Karp said. “That’s why it’s such an explosive topic.” ■

— Merrill Douglas

JEW, COMMERCE AND CULTURE

Jonathan Karp is delving further into historical thought on Jewish economics this academic year as a fellow at the University of Pennsylvania’s Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. Each year, the center assembles scholars from throughout the world to research and discuss an aspect of Jewish culture. Collaborating with two other researchers, Karp helped write the proposal for the current topic, “Jews, Commerce and Culture.”

While in residence during 2008-09, Karp is studying the Protestant Reformation, which occurred just before the period he covers in his recent book. His aim is to look at how that Christian reform movement changed the discourse on Jewish economic identity. Other scholars in the program specialize in a wide range of subjects, such as Jews in 16th-century Mediterranean trade, American business history, economic life in Israel and the economic aspects of the Hasidic movement.

It’s about time Jewish historians gave more thought to economic life, Karp said. “One scholar described Jewish history as a head without a body,” he said. “It’s as if the material, physical, life-sustaining part has been generally ignored, and only the stuff that goes on in the head is what anybody pays attention to. We’re trying to recover the Jewish body.”