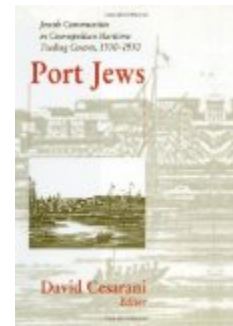


# H-Net Reviews

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David Cesarani, ed. *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550-1950*. London and Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002. vii + 208 pp. \$55.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7146-8286-0; \$180.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7146-5349-5.

Reviewed by David Graizbord (Committee on Judaic Studies, University of Arizona)  
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## Reframing Jewish History

Historians of modern Jews have devoted considerable attention to Jews' "modernization," often viewing that phenomenon through the lens of Jews' encounter with the European Enlightenment and with the prospects and subsequent dilemmas of political emancipation. Scholars have frequently presented two Ashkenazic figures or "types" from middle Europe as emblematic of the decline of Jewish tradition and as agents of cultural change that contributed to the collapse of the ghetto in modern times. The first figure is the cosmopolitan "court Jew"—in most cases, a financier. He is typically portrayed as a precursor of Jewish modernity for his integration with and participation in the (proto-)capitalist economy and court society of absolutist, central European states. The second type is the eloquent *maskil*, meaning a proponent of *Haskalah*, the native Jewish ideology of "enlightened" modernization. His pursuit of secular scholarship and his rationalistic critiques of rabbinic tradition, the story goes, provided key elements of the durable intellectual basis for the secularization of Jewish society and culture. The essays in this collection are largely devoted to examining a typological alternative to these overrated figures—the "port Jew." By extension, the volume participates in the long-term effort, begun in such works as Todd Endelman's *The Jews of Georgian England* (1979), to correct a tendency in the historiography to see Jewish history since the late-eighteenth century largely as the outcome of a process of self-conscious westernization as represented by the lives of highly atypical, Germanized Jewish intellectuals.

All but one of the essays in the volume are historical

case studies. They primarily test, not cultural evolution in port cities—as suggested by the urban-geographic analysis of Brian Hoyle's opening essay—but the utility of the construct of the "port Jew." This designation identifies a social type first discussed in separate works by two of the contributors, Lois Dubin and David Sorkin.

For Dubin, "port Jews" were (and are) not simply Jews who lived in port cities. Rather, they were Jewish merchants "valued for their engagement in the international maritime trade upon which such cities thrived" (p. 47), men whose path toward integration with their host societies was therefore unique. Here, Dubin reprises her thesis about modern Trieste that "the kind of interaction that occurs in the port ... leads to significant [Jewish] acculturation ... and contributes to a non-denominational morality shared by productive, useful merchants" (p. 51). Dubin further proposes that the "port Jew" be extended to describe "port Jewry"—a particular type of Jewish community existing at the historical nexus between maritime commerce, utility, and culture. Finally, she argues that the two concepts, "port Jew" and "port Jewry," may serve as useful tools in the comparative study of Jewish societies, individuals, and their surrounding non-Jewish societies across time and space. By contrast, Sorkin regards "port Jew" as a concept applicable only to a historically unique cohort of Sephardi and Italian-Jewish merchants who participated in the Mediterranean and transatlantic economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The socio-cultural profile of these men, as Sorkin and others have contended, was marked by religious adapt-

ability and a reluctant cosmopolitanism that was alien to both traditional and “enlightened” Jewish identities. Sorkin is especially wary of disassociating the concept of “port Jews” from the historical problems of modernization that he originally intended the concept to illuminate, including the distinctive process(es) of Jewish emancipation. His article for the collection is partly an attempt to refine an understanding of Jewish emancipation (as distinct from its historical consequences) by constructing a brief typology of the phenomenon. In so doing, Sorkin attempts to clarify what he sees as the historical place of “port Jews” in specific, local forms and instances of that phenomenon. Against Dubin’s expansive view, he proposes that the distinction between Jews who live(d) in port cities and “port Jews,” should be maintained. This, he contends, would prevent the dilution of the concept, “while identifying the phenomenon of Jews in port cities as a virtually unlimited subject with neither fixed geographical nor chronological boundaries” (p. 31).

Sorkin’s essay suggests a crucial question. It may well constitute the main, underlying historiographical challenge that Cesarani’s collection poses: to what extent does the typological, generalizing approach that is characteristic of social scientific research, and specifically the reliance on abstract models for purposes of description and explanation, facilitate historical insight, and when does it impede it? Implicitly or explicitly, the contributors to the volume address this question via a wide array of data on the history of Jews in port cities. In the interests of brevity and depth, below I concentrate on merely a few of the eleven contributions.

Jonathan Schorsch offers what is perhaps the most direct corroboration of Sorkin’s circumscribed concept of “port Jews.” Schorsch proposes that the conceptions of race and the related social practices of seventeenth-century, port-dwelling Sephardim were shaped principally by these Jews’ deep engagement in the transatlantic mercantile economy—especially the slave trade—and were not artifacts of rabbinic tradition alone. For his part, Rainer Liedtke’s treatment of Hamburg (1590–1933) offers a clear counterpoint to Dubin’s position that port Jews’ commercial utility fostered a liberal social environment into which they might acculturate with relative readiness. As Liedtke shows, Hamburg’s Jews found the city attractive for its economic vitality, yet they were never more than a discriminated minority within a staunchly Lutheran community with a tradition of closed, oligarchic politics and a self-protecting bourgeoisie. Partly as a result, the Jews’ cultivation of their social separateness at the strictly local level (their provin-

cialism, in a sense) did not abate. Most Jewish Hamburgers had little contact even with migrating Jews from Eastern Europe, despite the fact that neighboring Bremen was one of the latter’s main transit points.

In his contribution, Tony Kushner praises the “port Jew” model, especially Sorkin’s version of it, as a corrective to the “Ashkenazification” of modern Jewish history. Yet he also criticizes the concept as elitist in that it privileges intellectual and commercial achievement among port-bound Sephardim. Then, following Dubin’s invitation, Kushner presents the case of Jewish residents of provincial English ports. He argues that despite a certain social and political timidity, middle-class and working-class Jews in Southampton and Portsmouth, who were not intellectually notable, managed to become anglicized and socially integrated by the nineteenth century. This outcome Kushner attributes largely to the fact that a genuinely cosmopolitan (if lowbrow) culture coalesced in these ports. Both places, he explains, rendered access to a global diaspora, a transoceanic, mercantile economy that was vibrant, and both were full of Jewish and other migrants. By introducing the analytical category of class, and by studying Jews in places that were culturally and politically peripheral, Kushner articulates an agenda for writing local history “from below” that still accommodates the overarching conception of the “port Jew.”

David Cesarani’s essay (like his introduction and conclusion) seconds the emphasis on widening the descriptive scope and applicability of the model. Cesarani’s immediate aim is to propose a redefinition of London’s Jews as examples of that social type. Yet his most interesting contribution is a general qualification of the very concept. Commercial values and political pragmatism, he explains, could as easily work against port Jews as in favor of them, because port cities were and are by nature Janus-faced and, thus, change. In the end, Cesarani concedes that while the “port Jew” aptly describes certain historical phenomena, “more research is needed to uncover and understand the dynamism and the precise ligaments that articulate the history of city ports with Jewish history and culture” (p. 123). This strikes me as a necessary admission that the model is not all that useful as such. Cesarani clearly disagrees, preferring that the model be retained but reconfigured so that it becomes responsive to the complexity of each of the places and circumstances being studied.

The effort to prove the utility of the paradigm along the lines of Cesarani’s revision continues with Mark Lev-ene’s essay on the rise and fall of Salonican Jewry, Maria

Vassilikou's essay on Jewish-Greek relations in Salonica and Odessa, and John Klier's reading of Odessa as a cosmopolitan "anti-shtetl" (p. 175) for Jews of the Russian Empire. Jonathan Goldstein concludes the collection with something of a cautionary rejoinder to the Cesarani-Dubin line, however. His essay examines, among other cases, the example of nineteenth-century Harbin, China, an *inland* city where Jews enjoyed opportunities for acculturation, economic ascent, and legal equality as surely as Jews in Western seaports did. To the author this case, and the fact that Jews who resided in port cities such as Shanghai did not enjoy such prospects, calls into question the applicability of the "port Jew" concept in the East and requires recourse to other models. (Goldstein specifically proposes Caroline Golab's theory on "the relation-

ship between the duration of residence of an immigrant community and its institutional development" [p. 179].)

Like Goldstein, some readers may find the focus on port cities (rather than, say, all commercial centers) limiting. So too, the singular focus on the theoretical "port Jew" tends to be overbearing. Paradoxically, one of the most appealing contributions of the volume is the incisive questioning of the model itself, and what strikes me as the subtle but ultimate supremacy of the very interesting, case-specific information each essay renders over the mere instrumentality of abstraction. After the "port Jew" and "modernization" have had their say, so to speak, all the essays hint of larger, richly-textured, and compelling research.

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