

Adam Teller, Rebecca Kobrin, eds.. *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History.*

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Historians in Jewish studies have generally avoided rigorous analytical engagement with the relationship of Jews to commerce. Instead, “ideational” aspects of the Jewish experience—religion, culture, memory, and identity—have occupied the center of scholarly attention. In *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History*, editors Rebecca Kobrin and Adam Teller open, or rather reopen, this highly charged topic. They do so by bringing together essays from some of the leading scholars of the “economic turn” in Jewish history, resulting in a critical and, at times, bold volume.

Any scholarly investigation of Jewish economic activity is burdened by the topic’s anti-Semitic legacy. Kobrin and Teller contend that this legacy is best confronted not by avoiding questions about economy and Jewish life but rather by using the tools of the historian to confront the subject directly. Their introduction foregrounds how concerns about anti-Semitism have shaped the trajectory of scholarship in their own discipline. In it, they offer a critical, historiographic assessment of the research—and its absence—on the economic dimensions of Jewish life within the European and American academies. The contributing authors’ analyses, Kobrin and Teller maintain, attend especially to the “specific local legal, eco-

nomic, and political structures (not to mention the power struggles) that shaped the economic choices made by the Jewish actors in question” (p. 4). This commitment to historical specificity resists the kinds of broad generalizations that haunt essentialist analyses of Jewish economic behavior. Simultaneously, this approach underwrites the broader theoretical contributions of the volume: bringing questions of economy into modern Jewish history and bringing Jewish studies into scholarly conversation with new trends in economic history.

The book is divided into two parts, “Networks and Niches: The Creation of Jewish Economic Power” and “Philanthropy, Money, and the Development of Power in Jewish Economic History.” Bernard Cooperman begins the first section, focusing on Jewish moneylending in sixteenth-century Rome. The chapter explores the political, legal, and economic conditions that gave rise to a cartel of Jewish bankers, and how they strategically maneuvered between both Jewish and non-Jewish legal systems. In chapter 2, Carsten Wilke looks at the involvement of Portuguese New Christians in the seventeenth-century Spanish tobacco trade. Despite the Inquisition, Spain entrusted its lucrative tobacco monopoly to administration by Portuguese New Christians, creating a

relationship that proved both symbiotic and mutually risky. Cornelia Aust challenges scholarly assumptions that kinship and ethnic ties automatically sustained Ashkenazi Jewish business networks in early modern Europe. Exploring case studies in which business networks failed, she shows how trust among businessmen depended on the interplay between personal reputation and formal institutions. Glenn Dynner, in “Jewish Quarters,” looks at the impact of outsider perceptions of Jewish economic prowess in early nineteenth-century Poland. Tsarist authorities feared that Polish Jews would dominate the economy, thus leading to the implementation of Jewish residential segregation. Dynner explores both Polish Jews’ responses to these policies and the economic and cultural consequences of their reactions. In chapter 5, Adam Mendelsohn follows the economic story of a single British family, the Moses family, to examine how these Jewish clothing merchants’ economic fortunes interacted with the empire’s burgeoning colonial markets. Jonathan Karp’s rich, comparative account of Jewish involvement in the mid-twentieth-century American and British rock-and-roll music industries tracks the character and impact of Jewish culture brokers on the music business and the development of popular music itself.

The second section opens with Abigail Green’s chapter on the emergence of what she calls “the Jewish International” between 1840 and 1880. Green details how the international press and mass subscription philanthropy gave rise to new ways in which wealthy philanthropists could marshal large Jewish publics around issues of international Jewish concern. Derek Penslar’s analysis of the Yishuv’s funding and arms acquisition practices shows how Israel’s victory in the 1948 war depended on “the same [diasporic] informal business and social networks” that Zionism’s ideology of landedness and national self-reliance sought to negate (p. 190). His chapter aims to comparatively situate the financing of the Yishuv within a broader anti-colonial context—though this framework

demands a more nuanced justification than the space of a book chapter allows. Veerle Vanden Daelen describes how the Orthodox character of Antwerp’s postwar Jewish community was grounded in transnational economic networks linked to the diamond industry. Jonathan Dekel-Chen’s chapter on transnational Jewish advocacy for Soviet Jewry cuts against the triumphalist grain that often marks scholarship on Jewish philanthropy, describing the failure of the movement to achieve its stated goals. Adam Sutcliffe closes the volume by reassessing Walter Sombart’s infamous *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (originally published in 1911; translation in 1913). Sutcliffe situates Sombart’s work within early twentieth-century German sociology, tracing its reception within the context of debates—including those between Zionists and assimilations—about economy and Jewish difference.

Purchasing Power is an ambitious volume that seeks to tackle the “big questions” of economy and power in the shaping of Jewish life and culture (p. 24). Yet it achieves this goal as much through the questions it provokes as through the issues its authors explicitly address. Take for example Dekel-Chen’s analysis of transnational Jewish philanthropy, in which the author slides between “philanthropy” and “advocacy” in his discussion of activism for Soviet Jewry, thus implicitly raising the question of the analytical and practical boundaries of “economic activity.” Penslar’s comparative evaluation of the funding of the Yishuv to that of other post-World War II “anti-regime actors” depends, ultimately, on an acceptance of an *ideological*, in this case nationalist, construction of the terms of conflict between the Zionist movement and the British (p. 173). Within the heated politics of Israeli-Palestinian historiography, this kind of categorization is *itself* an object of both scholarly and political contestation, and materialist analyses often figure centrally in debates about Zionism’s relationship to European colonialism. What is the relationship, Penslar’s work implicitly asks, between materialist analy-

ses and the categories from which scholars depart? These are, of course, longstanding questions in the humanities and social sciences—precisely the kinds of “big questions” the editors are after. In that sense, the openness of such questions are less shortcomings of the volume than they are productive calls for further research into the economic dimensions of Jewish life. These are promising directions for Jewish studies, offering to bring scholars into lively, cross-disciplinary debates in the academy. *Purchasing Power* is a bold step in that direction.

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