

EMPIRE AND THE JEWS

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“Empire” is a prevalent concept across the social sciences and humanities today, but scholars in Jewish studies have been slow, even reluctant, to engage it. Empire refers to a constellation of supranational political and economic power, a form of power so closely associated with anti-Semitic fantasy that scholars in Jewish studies are hesitant to probe what reality might lie behind the myth.

Representations of Jews are part of larger discursive formations that function within global political and economic contexts, but those contexts have barely been explored by scholars in Jewish studies: an important example that we have dealt with elsewhere is orientalism. Indeed in Jewish studies today economics is all but ignored, and politics is ensconced within the rubrics of communal or national activism and the Israeli polity. International Jewish economic and political activity, the confluence between them, and the nexus of that activity with empire’s global reach are essential subjects for future study.

In the brief space allotted to us here, we will leave aside premodern empires of Western Antiquity and the Islamic world. Our focus is the West and three phases of empire within it, following Walter Mignolo’s concept of three successive missions directed from the West: the medieval and early modern Christian mission, the modern civilizing mission, and the postmodern mission of global, material development. What, historically, has been the role of

Jews in these various stages of Western empire?

In the “Christianizing” stage, led by Spain and Portugal, Jews were expelled from Iberia yet established themselves so well in the Low Countries, the economic engine of the Spanish crown, that some were able to play an important role in the colonial development of the West Indies, first under Spanish, and then Dutch control. Thus Jews were present at the creation of the global capitalist system that Immanuel Wallerstein famously presented as the dawn of modern sensibility. In the “civilizing mission” stage begun in the seventeenth century, as the focus of Western power shifted slowly from the south to the north of Europe, Jews continued to play a visible role in the form of the “Port Jew,” the internationally-linked, multilingual merchant, often of Sephardic origin.

The story of Jews and early modern empire has been chronicled by a number of historians, but they have focused on economic activity and have not worked through its political implications for either the Jews’ communities or the empires in which they dwelled. We need to think more deeply about how Jews’ economic, social, cultural, and political capital were inextricably bound and mutually reinforcing. Less explored, and more controversial, is the relationship between Jews and the last phase of the civilizing mission, the era of high imperialism (c. 1880–1945). Modern anti-Semitism rose in the Western world at the same time as the scramble for overseas possessions that extended the Great Powers’ control or influence to reach some four-fifths of the globe’s population. So was imperialism in some ways linked with Jews and the growing agitation against them?

The elements of the bourgeoisie who most benefited from this

imperial system were exporters of manufactured goods, importers of raw materials, owners of plantations and mines overseas, and, finally, the financiers who provided the funds and the traders who mediated between producers and consumers. Except for the financiers, Jews did not figure prominently among these lynchpins of imperialism. Jewish manufacturers were marginal in the imperial centers, England and France. On the raw materials side, the owners of plantations were rarely Jewish. Mine owners, too, were seldom Jewish, except in the South African gold and diamond industry. Although Jews were closely associated with the trade in certain colonial products, there is little sign of Jewish participation in the colonial economy beyond their usual involvement in the distributive sector within the Western world.

Territorial control, as a defining feature of imperialism, necessitated not only capital and capitalists but also the systematic assertion of political and military power. The imperial service, both civil and military, provided employment for the sons of the privileged at the helm and for the superfluous “masses” at the bottom. Few Jews were found in either group. Throughout most of the Western world Jewish participation in the armed forces and the civil service was limited due to a combination of discrimination from without and the Jews’ own career preferences. There were exceptions. Benjamin Disraeli, Britain’s most imperialist prime minister, reckoned his Jewish origins as an “Arabian” trait linking this exotic colonizer to the colonized Orient. Jewish officers and soldiers were found in the French and Italian colonial forces. In the colonies themselves, administrations often privileged local Jews and other “middleman” minorities over the rest of the population. But none of this translated into large-scale

involvement by home-country Jews in the imperial effort.

Jews were, as a group, objectively irrelevant to imperialism. Yet it was during the height of imperialism that they began to be more than ever reviled for their alleged control over the economy and the politics of every Western state. Anti-Semites identified the Jews as a major noxious force just when their sociopolitical importance was objectively in decline. The problem was the very “civilizing mission” that Mignolo located as the principal discourse of north European imperialism. Civilization was, fatefully for Jews, understood as the achievement not only of the Christian faith but also of the European “races.” It was not generally believed that the Jewish “race” was one of them. The relative absence of Jews in the imperial enterprise made it easier to argue for excluding them, along with the “natives” of the colonies, from the benefits of the “Western” guarantees of liberty and equality, and indeed of residence in the West.

A more direct association may be established between fin-de-siècle empire and the Zionist movement. Seeking the protection of the Great Powers, early Zionist leaders of necessity became embroiled in imperialist intrigue, and the Zionist movement became from both the Western and the Arab point of view an instrument of European imperialism. Zionism was steeped in colonialist mentalities regarding the cultural superiority of the European over the Arab, and the Zionist ideal of “making the desert bloom” paralleled French claims that Algeria had been desertified under Muslim rule but would become a verdant paradise as part of *la France integrale*. Zionist aims had little in common with the practices of colonialist ventures that exploited native labor and resources, but the growth of the Yishuv did bear



Disraeli offers Victoria the “oriental” crown of India to replace the English one.
Drawing by John Tenniel, in the *London Punch* (1876).

resemblances to the settlement colonialisms practiced by Europeans in the New World or the Boers in South Africa. That said, Zionism’s many idiosyncratic qualities stymie its facile classification as a form of settlement colonialism. Moreover, Zionism shared important aspects with the worldwide decolonization movement, and was so regarded by many African, Asian, and African-American leaders in the early stages of Israel’s independence.

A final round of questions concerns the role of Jews in the latest stage of empire, with “development” (and now “democracy” and the “war on terror”) having replaced “civilization” as its mission. Because of their often exaggerated role in the history of international trade and finance, Jews have been accused by enemies and praised by friends as an easy fit with transnational capitalism, most recently and with considerable *chutzpah* by Yuri Slezkine, the witty author of *The Jewish Century* (2004). But in today’s business and finance there

are hardly any exclusively or predominantly Jewish networks, and the involvement of prominent Jews, even in so visible a form as the capitalist oligarchs in postcommunist Russia, is at the personal, not the group level. The global economic order shows no sign of being singularly influenced by Jews in anything like the manner in which, say, the Hungarian economy was before World War II.

A better founded argument could be made for recognizing a strong Jewish and Israeli role in the current global order. Only an extremely partial observer could deny the prominence of Israeli interests, as defended by important American-Jewish organizations, in the calculations of American governments, especially in their decisions on the Middle East.

The alliance is, however, not essential to empire as a new form of global sovereignty, but expresses the individual efforts of the United States and Israel to further their specific political positions within that new empire. As stated at the outset, the concept of empire represents a confluence of political and economic power, and the U.S.-Israeli alliance is overwhelmingly political. For this most contemporary of topics, as for those rooted in the distant past, scholars in Jewish studies must confront the realities of Jewish power, learn to distinguish between its various forms, and appreciate Jews’ historic reliance upon transnational forces, which, whether material or cultural, have often originated within the paradigm of empire.

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