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Capitalism and the Jews (review)

Gideon Reuveni

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Jerry Z. Muller. *Capitalism and the Jews*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-14478-8, \$24.95 (cloth).

In 1911, the German sociologist Werner Sombart published his notorious study *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*, translated into English as *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (1913). Sombart's book was conceptualized as a rejoinder to Max Weber's study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (first published in 1904/1905), in which he notably established a link between the spirit of capitalism and Protestantism. Sombart accepted Weber's thesis of the religious sources of modern capitalism and even offered his book as a direct development of Weber's study on the origins of modern capitalism. Yet, in contrast to Weber, Sombart claimed that everything Weber had ascribed to Protestantism was actually rooted in Judaism and more intensively practiced by the Jews. Further, Sombart identified the Jews themselves, as opposed to Jewish culture or religion, as the originators and drivers of modern capitalism, based on their alleged racial and physiological characteristics. Although Sombart's book was more a rehash of the age-old perception of the special affinity of Jews to money than an original explanation for the origins of modern capitalism, it initiated vehement discussion. The reason for this was not only Sombart's position as one of the most respected German sociologists of the early twentieth century, a rank which gave academic credibility to his ideas, but also the debate about capitalism itself, which in the period after 1900 was symptomatic for a sense that a deep-seated schism existed in the social development of the epoch. As a result, the question of the Jews and capitalism became highly politicized. After the Holocaust, it also became almost taboo, resulting in a marked decline in academic interest in the subject since World War II. In this sense, *Capitalism and the Jews* is a welcome and important study that contributes to the renewal of interest in a significant topic that has lacked reputable scholarly attention in recent decades.

It is interesting not only to call attention to some commonalities but also to fundamental differences between Muller's and Sombart's works, which in many ways could be read as a manifestation of the changing attitudes to capitalism and the Jews over the last century. Like Sombart, Muller too basically accepts the notion of Jewish economic distinctiveness and the special affinity of Jews to money. Although for the German sociologist, Jewish economic singularity served as a pretext to articulate his animus against modern capitalism, Muller appears to be more concerned with the fate of capitalism and the associated question of how it might affect the Jews. Informing his approach is not only the contention that "Jews are good

at capitalism,” but also that “capitalism is good for the Jews.” It is difficult to quibble with such a sweeping statement. For example, Muller does not convey to us what the term “good” exactly means in this context. But as he himself admits in the introduction, the essays included in this book operate at a level of generalization with which most historians will feel uncomfortable.

The first chapter provides an illuminating discussion of the views of some prominent European thinkers on the association of Jews with money. Muller distinguishes between three major responses to this juxtaposition, which could be simplistically depicted as the good, the bad, and the indefinable. To the first category, belong thinkers like Montesquieu, and especially the sociologist Georg Simmel, who according to Muller neither downplayed or overstated the role of the Jews as capitalists, but developed a favorable conception of capitalism as a civilizing force promoting “individuality based on choice,” (50) facilitating more understanding and connections between people. Scholars like Karl Marx, and even more so Werner Sombart, are examples of the second type of response, amalgamating anticapitalism and antisemitism. Max Weber, who according to Muller simply ignored the Jews and was ambivalent about capitalism, is an example of the third type of a more undefined response. Interestingly, Muller does not discuss here Weber’s conception of pariah capitalism, which he clearly associated with Jews, and largely negatively.

In Chapter 2, Muller explores the success story of Jews in market societies. His analysis is based on a definition of capitalism as a social mechanism regulated by the free market. According to this approach, the development of a capitalist economy concomitantly facilitates and depends on so-called human capital, that is, the level of ingenuity, skills, experience, and the identification of opportunity of members of society. According to Muller, several factors paved the way for Jewish economic ascent in the age of capitalism, including the special position of the Jews as a minority group specializing in commerce, historical circumstances that have facilitated their flexibility and mobility, the Jewish emphasis on education and family life, as well as the sober and pragmatic approach to money in Judaism.

Given the successful performance of the Jews in modern market societies, Chapter 3 asks why, then, so many Jews have appeared to embrace anticapitalism. According to Muller, Jewish economic success was also a source of embracement leading “a small but salient minority of Jews” (6) to engage even with what he dubs “radical anticapitalism,” (without a hyphen), that is, communism. The argument here is that the perception of Jewish prominence in communism was informed by the antisemitic myth of Jewish bolshevism and does not reflect the actual involvement with or the views of most Jews toward communism.

In the final chapter, Muller takes on the question of nationalism. He mainly deals with Zionism, overlooking other forms of Jewish nationalism, especially that of the Jewish Bund that until the Holocaust was much more dominant in large centers of Jewish life in eastern Europe. The discussion of the Zionist socialist Ber Borochov and the social theorist Ernest Gellner's conceptions of ethno-nationalism under capitalism is stimulating, but clearly, there is much more to be said here about the multifaceted interplay between nationalism and capitalism in the Jewish context.

Despite its drawbacks, *Capitalism and the Jews* is an important study that affords readers a lucid and extremely accessible analysis of what is no doubt a central topic in Jewish and western history. It is a welcome addition that joins recent efforts to make us more aware of the significance of the economy for our understanding of the modern Jewish experience.

Gideon Reuveni
University of Sussex

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Mark Garrett Cooper. *Universal Women: Filmmaking and Institutional Change in Early Hollywood*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. ix +230 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03522-7, \$93.59 (cloth); 978-0-252-07700-5, \$25.00 (paper).

In a crucial 2004 essay in *Cinema Journal*, "Film History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory," Jane Gaines pointed to a double-edged historical puzzle facing feminist film scholars with respect to early cinema history. That is, how to explain the rapid rise and fall of women's influence in the international film industry during the silent era as well as the failure of "second wave" feminist film scholars to examine this phenomenon (as part of the emergence of a powerful subfield within the discipline). Feminist scholarship on early cinema has increased dramatically in the twenty-first century with ongoing "discoveries" of women's central role in this era. However, as Gaines notes, this neither explains the original erasure by the film industry or subsequent one by groundbreaking scholarship focused primarily on how the screen itself relays structures of gendered representation (113). To confront this two-sided riddle, Gaines suggests not so much a counter-narrative to film history—a causal chain that illuminates