

Article

Political Economy as a Test of Modern Judaism

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Abstract: According to a common narrative, Jews entered the modern world at a steep price. From an autonomous corporation, ruling themselves internally according to their own standards and law, Judaism became a “religion,” divested of political power and responsible only for the internal sphere of “faith” or belief. The failure of this project, in turn, gave rise to the sharp split between Jewish nationalism and religion-based conceptions of Judaism. Many modern Jewish thinkers sought to resolve this antinomy by imagining ways for Judaism to once again form the basis of a “complete life”. This essay seeks to challenge this narrative by examining the extent to which economics, another one of the “spheres” emerging together with modernity and often considered under the same broadly Weberian process of rationalization, ever truly formed part of the holistic, self-contained Jewish autonomous life for which modern thinkers expressed so much nostalgia. It will argue that rather than forming part of the internal world of Judaism and then being fragmented outward into a separate sphere under the pressure of modernity, the “economic sphere” was imagined and defined for the first time in modernity, and projected backwards into earlier eras. This projection was then taken as proof of Judaism’s ability to “be about everything,” whether in a religious or nationalist idiom.

Keywords: Judaism; modern Jewish thought; economics; political economy

1. Introduction: Jews and Economies in Modern Jewish Thought and Scholarship

According to a common narrative, Jews entered the modern world at a steep price: their former unity and integrity. From an autonomous theopolitical collective, subject to onerous external restrictions but internally free to operate according to its own standards and law, Judaism became a “religion,” divested of public regulatory power and responsible only for the private sphere of “faith” or belief. The inherent tensions within this project, in turn, gave rise to a sharp split between secular Jewish nationalism and religion-based circumscriptions of a formerly holistic Judaism. Many modern Jewish thinkers then sought to resolve this antinomy, reunifying the separated spheres by imagining ways for Judaism to once again form the basis of a “complete life.”

One finds this narrative articulated in two major modes, which overlap and intertwine, but can be distinguished from each other conceptually as ideal types. The first is as a component of first-order, constructive, normative philosophical or theological accounts of Jewish modernity by Jewish thinkers of the late eighteenth to the early twenty-first centuries (“primary sources”). The second is as a component of second-order, ostensibly objective, historical accounts by professional scholars of modern Jews and Judaism (“secondary sources”). While the foundations, goals, and methods of these genres are ostensibly very different, I would argue that they are normatively undergirded by a similar impulse, namely, to decry fragmented modernity and offer some way of restoring Judaism’s pre-modern, pre-lapsarian unity. The first mode does this with explicit recommendations (move to Palestine; apply Jewish teachings and values to new spheres of life, etc.), while the second mode does it through genealogical accounts of the origins and therefore the contingency of the status quo.

For an example of mode one, consider Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of nineteenth-century neo-Orthodoxy, claiming in 1854 that “Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life; it comprises all of life.”¹ Hirsch makes this claim in explicit rejection of the Reform conception of a *Religion im Bund mit dem Fortschritt*, a “religion allied to progress,” which he sees as a disintegrating force that denies religion by attempting to assign to it a particular place in modern life, one sphere alongside others. But, Hirsch says, this is impossible:

The subordination of religion to any other factor means the denial of religion: for if the Torah is to you the Law of God how dare you place another law above it and go along with God and His Law only as long as you thereby ‘progress’ in other respects at the same time? You must admit it: it is only because ‘religion’ does not mean to you the word of God, because in your heart you deny Divine Revelation, because you believe not in Revelation given to man but in Revelation from man, that you can give man the right to lay down conditions to religion.²

Hirsch casts himself here as the spokesperson for a unified Judaism, taking his stand against the modernizing and therefore also atomizing Reformers, who try to introduce alien elements into tradition and even to subordinate that which is rightfully dominant to those elements. But this Reform project must necessarily fail, and in the meantime it must be rejected, since as Hirsch puts it, “Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the rabbi is not a priest . . . to be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life.”³

The structure of this argument, while popular with modern Orthodox thinkers following in Hirsch’s footsteps, is by no means restricted to them. Anyone who assumes a counter-cultural or anti-liberal stance, regardless of whether this stance is “conservative” or “radical,” can make use of it. For example, six decades after Hirsch, here is Martin Buber, speaking to an audience of acculturated Central European Jewish youth in Prague:

A striving for unity: for unity within individual man; for unity between divisions of the nation, and between nations; for unity between mankind and every living thing; and for unity between God and the world . . . This, as we have seen, has always been and will continue to be Judaism’s significance for mankind; that it confronts mankind with the demand for unity, a unity born out of one’s own duality and the redemption from it.⁴

The duality here is exile, brokenness, and fallenness. Unity is the healing of duality, the mending of a wound. Unity is redemption. Although Buber is attributing to Judaism an essential core, which would belong to it across time and space, it is clear that for both him and his audience the situation of modernity poses special challenges to this “striving for unity” precisely by creating new divisions that need to be unified. Like Hirsch, Buber rejects the idea of Judaism as a “religion” that takes its place as one sphere of life alongside others of equal value. Instead, it must abolish these very spheres themselves, unifying them and thereby redeeming them.

This, I argue, is not merely a theological position taken by one particular strand of constructive, normative modern Jewish thinkers, but also a historiographical mode, influencing and permeating large swaths of contemporary scholarship on religion. To illustrate this claim, let us consider a few contemporary trends in the historiography of Judaism and modern Jewish thought. A recent popular introduction to modern Jewish thought by Leora Batnitzky carries the title *How Judaism Became a Religion*.⁵ In her introduction, Batnitzky writes that “Prior to modernity, which I will define in

¹ (Hirsch 2011, p. 223).

² (Ibid., p. 221).

³ (Ibid., pp. 222–23).

⁴ (Buber 1995, pp. 27, 32).

⁵ (Batnitzky 2011).

the pages that follow as the acquisition of citizenship rights for Jews, Judaism was not a religion, and Jewishness was not a matter of culture or nationality. Rather, Judaism and Jewishness were all these at once: religion, culture, and nationality.”⁶ The Rutgers series on Key Words in Jewish Studies has recently published books by Cynthia Baker and Daniel Boyarin, on the words *Jew* and *Judaism*, respectively, informing us of ways in which our current use of these terms is permeated by modern, Christian, and specifically Protestant biases.⁷ All of this is quite in line with trends across Religious Studies, for example in work by Robert Orsi on the place of Catholicism and a religion of materiality and “presence” in a world dominated by Protestant conceptions of religion as cognitive belief, or in studies by Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood on the ways that modern Europe has created structures and concepts of religion which colonized subjects, including Muslims, have had to adapt to or resist.⁸ In other words, the broad self-critique of Religious Studies in general maps easily onto one of the most common narratives within Jewish Studies in particular.

Let us return for a moment, however, to Batnitzky’s formulation of Jewish modernity, which is itself in conversation with these pan-Religious-Studies trends. Batnitzky argues that much of the creative tension of modern Jewish thought emerges from new questions of Jewish identity that arose only in modernity:

It simply was not possible in a premodern context to conceive of Jewish religion, nationality, and what we now call culture as distinct from one another, because a Jew’s religious life was defined by, though not limited to, Jewish law, which was simultaneously religious, political, and cultural in nature. Jewish modernity most simply defined represents the dissolution of the political agency of the corporate Jewish community and the concurrent shift of political agency to the individual Jew who became a citizen of the modern nation-state.⁹

In this concise and powerful definition of Jewish modernity, Batnitzky draws our attention to three of the spheres of life famously described by Max Weber as undergoing a process of “rationalization” in modernity: religion, politics, and culture. For Weber, part of what rationalization entailed was the gradual, functional, and increasing differentiation of these spheres, until each of them reached the point of being fully autonomous, not subject to rules issued by the others.¹⁰ This, then, gives rise to the problem Batnitzky describes: with which of these new spheres is Judaism to be most identified? Is it fully identical to any one of them, or does it transcend and rule over all of them?

One of those spheres, however, and perhaps even, for Weber, the most significant one, is missing here: economy. This may be due to the fact that, as Michael Satlow has pointed out, “if the line between religion and politics in our society seems at times to be blurry, the one between religion and the economy could hardly be brighter.”¹¹ We can imagine that Jewish identity would be presented in modernity as a religion, as a politics, and as a culture, but it is hard to imagine what it would mean to claim that Judaism “is” an economy. On the other hand, as noted earlier, anyone polemically committed to the proposition that Judaism must, as Hirsch argued, give laws to the other spheres, and not receive laws from them, must subordinate economy to Judaism as well.

This essay seeks to explore the intersection of modern Jewish thought and the “sphere” of economy, in the process complicating and challenging the narrative that a once-unified Jewish life was shattered by modernity. A fundamental problem for scholars is that the “economic sphere”, much like

⁶ (Ibid., p. 2).

⁷ (Baker 2017; Boyarin 2018). Actually, both scholars emphasize that the Christian origins of these terms are ancient; but it is modernity that sees them adopted as self-descriptions by Jews themselves.

⁸ (Orsi 2018; Asad 2009; Mahmood 2011).

⁹ (Batnitzky 2011, p. 4).

¹⁰ Rationalization entails much more than this, particularly the tendency of each sphere to develop in the direction of offering increasing calculability, predictability, and control. However, differentiation is what matters most for our purposes. The theme can be found throughout Weber’s work, but see in particular his 1920 introduction to his 1904 work, (Weber 1992, pp. xxviii–xliv). The later introduction was written as a general introduction to his sociology of religion.

¹¹ (Satlow 2018, p. 1).

the others, was imagined and defined *for the first time* in modernity, and then projected backwards into earlier eras. If we hold to the Weberian rationalization model, we acknowledge the problematic features of this projection—i.e., the fact that we are anachronistically describing the past according to contemporary categories—but then go on to do it anyway, since we need some way of naming the elements of premodern life that we see as seeds that will eventually grow into the separate modern trees. However, it is very easy to lose track of the heuristic function of such terms, and I would argue that in many cases this is what happened: the backwards projection of modern categories into the past has frequently been taken as proof—by both first-order, constructive philosophers and theologians as well as by second-order, descriptive scholars—of Judaism’s ability to “be about everything,” whether in a religious or nationalist idiom.¹² My ultimate aim is to question the rationalization model itself, along with its accompanying historical narrative [wholeness → fragmentation].

2. Constructions of Premodern Judaism and “Economic Issues”

A commitment to the concept of Judaism as transcending all the separate and divided spheres of modern life, and regulating them all, necessarily entails including the economic sphere as one of those subordinated and included within this all-embracing scope. However, this commitment does not in theory necessarily entail another claim, which nonetheless often occurs together with it in practice, and that is the claim that “traditional” or premodern Judaism *did in fact* regulate the economic sphere in this all-embracing way. This claim, in turn, takes two forms: (1) we know that Judaism regulated the economic sphere because Jewish writers produced legal texts that claimed precisely to do so; (2) we know that Judaism regulated the economic sphere because Jewish economic behavior indicated its regulation by Judaism. I will briefly describe how a few first-order writers advance this claim, before turning to the more sophisticated—but not for all that radically different—treatment of it in second-order writers.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative of reclaiming a unified Judaism from its modern, fragmented state has been popular with modern Orthodox writers since Hirsch. Unlike the ultra-Orthodox, who broadly see the modern world as something to protect against and retreat from, modern Orthodox thinkers often see modernity as an opportunity to apply a creative approach to halakha to new situations, thus demonstrating in the process that the first-century sage Ben Bag Bag spoke well of the Torah when he said “turn it and turn it, for everything is in it” (*M. Avot* 5:22). As the modern Orthodox leader, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, puts it: “The verse referring to sanctification by conquest—‘Every place where the soul of your foot shall tread, to you have I given it’—must be put into effect by us. Wherever we place our feet—be it in the laboratory or in the business office, in the university campus or in the factory—must be sanctified by us.”¹³ Crucial to this approach is the conception of halakha as a flexible, capacious legal system that nonetheless operates according to strict rules, including respect for precedent.

It is this last element, perhaps, that leads writers attached to this approach to make historical claims, only sometimes seeking authorization for these claims in professional historical scholarship. This can take the form of blatantly anachronistic characterizations of ancient or medieval literature, in claims like this one: “It is quite surprising to see how considerations underlying the ultra-modern economic theory of information search, for which its founder and developer, George J. Stigler, won the Nobel Prize (1982), are so deeply rooted in ancient Talmudic thinking.”¹⁴ Here, the rabbis are portrayed as anticipating an economic theory developed to address circumstances that simply did

¹² It must be acknowledged here that I am implicitly committing yet another anachronism by using Weber’s work as our heuristic point of reference: Hirsch, for example, preceded Weber by a half-century. Resolving this point would require independent exegesis of Weber, tracing his intellectual lineage, and ultimately linking him back to Romanticism—something that is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹³ (Soloveitchik 2002, p. 154).

¹⁴ (Liebermann 2010, p. 143).

not exist in the ancient world.¹⁵ This claim is sometimes buttressed by a related one, namely, that the issues underlying ancient rabbinic thought and contemporary economic theory are perennial because they are rooted in human nature: “While the Nehardean rabbis did not study modern contract theory, they were likely familiar with human nature and the human condition, and they may have felt that a linear contract provides sufficient incentives from a pure risk-aversion perspective to generate business ventures.”¹⁶ Finally, there are claims of the type advanced by the Orthodox scholar Meir Tamari, who argues explicitly that a certain pattern of Jewish economic activity in the Middle Ages “flows basically and primarily from fundamental Jewish philosophy and religious practices.”¹⁷ This stands in clear contrast to the consensus in contemporary academic scholarship on Jewish economic history, which Michael Satlow describes as agreeing that “historical contingency—based mainly on the opportunities and constraints with which each community had to deal—mattered far more than traditional Jewish texts, rituals, or ‘values’ in determining how that community dealt with economic issues.”¹⁸ One image is of a Jewish past in which a singular Judaism, embodied in the Torah and Talmud and codes, as taught by the rabbis of every generation, commanded the nigh-universal respect of Jewish communities everywhere; the other is of a much more complex world in which Jews of various times and places are muddling through while paying varying levels of heed to their leaders. Despite this important and sharp difference between first-order and second-order approaches to the intersection of Judaism and economics, the two discourses also share implicit assumptions.

Tamari, whose work inaugurates a whole genre of contemporary studies of Judaism and economic life, maintains as a central thesis that “there exists an ethical and moral framework for economic activity which is intrinsic to Judaism. This framework must not be confused with economic theory, nor must it be seen as promoting a capitalist or socialist economy. Rather, it is argued that it creates a special economy of its own.”¹⁹ This is clear, for Tamari, not only from his reading of the scriptural sources of Judaism, but also from the record of the actual practice of Jewish communities: “specifically Jewish moral and religious principles *have indeed* created a framework within which Jews *have operated* economically and can continue to operate.”²⁰ It is crucial for Tamari that this “special economy” of Judaism is “an ism of its own,” that it “differs radically” from other sacred and secular systems. This is because, as he puts it, “Judaism is not a religion in the usual sense of the word, but rather a nation-religion.”²¹ However, as we might expect, modernity poses challenges to recognizing this fact. Tamari writes that the idea for his book came to him when he realized that the corporate finance courses he was teaching at Bar-Ilan University, an Orthodox institution in Israel, were “exactly the same” as those of other universities around the world, “with the content completely divorced from a Jewish value system.”²² Somehow, despite the clear evidence of Judaism’s special economic teaching, Tamari’s book had become necessary—the value-free teaching of economics had to be met with a version specifically rooted in Judaism.

When it comes to describing this special “ism,” however, Tamari cannot but classify his presentation according to categories that contemporary readers understand. Thus, he offers chapters on competition, prices, and profits; on wages and labor; on money, banking, and interest; on taxation, and on welfare. This order of topics is not derived from the traditional sources on which he draws for

¹⁵ I lack the space in this paper to fully substantiate this claim. Here, I can only indicate that it must be proven, and not simply assumed, that ancient local and regional markets, of the type with which the Babylonian rabbis would have been familiar, bear comparison with the type of abstract market model developed by Stigler. For an example of a history of the medieval European economy that takes pains to distinguish between “commerce” and “capitalism,” particularly with respect to the question of local vs. integrated markets, see (Howell 2010).

¹⁶ (Callen 2010, p. 99).

¹⁷ (Tamari 2014, p. 72).

¹⁸ (Satlow 2018, p. 3).

¹⁹ (Tamari 2014, p. 62).

²⁰ (Ibid., p. 10). My italics.

²¹ (Ibid., pp. xii, xvi).

²² (Ibid., p. xix).

his arguments, but rather by contemporary practices of breaking down the subject matter of economics, whether in textbooks or syllabi. In this respect, Tamari and Satlow concur. Satlow's edited volume, *Judaism and the Economy*, is a collaborative effort of nearly two dozen scholars to translate and present for English-reading audiences the same kinds of sources on which Tamari draws.²³ That is to say, it is an anthology of largely ancient and medieval Jewish texts, excerpted and extracted from their original contexts in the Torah, Talmud, or Midrash, and arranged in such a way as to highlight their "economic" relevance.²⁴ Here, the sections are ordered chronologically, but the introduction groups them by topic: private property; socialism and the market; interest; poverty and wealth; rich and poor; poor relief; rights and obligations. To be sure, these scholars are by no means guilty of simple anachronism. They are fully aware, for example, that the sources they group into the "rights and obligations" section "sometimes use logic that is difficult to translate into our own categories of 'rights' and 'obligations'".²⁵ Nevertheless, there is a similarity between this project and Tamari's at the level of abstract method. Both scholars are engaged in a practice of disembedding and arranging, presenting ancient sources in ways that suit the contemporary desire to hear a Jewish tradition that speaks of "economics." That means, to some extent, ignoring the categories and classification schemes of the literature itself.²⁶ In this respect, both Tamari and Satlow, despite their differences, are repeating a practice that is itself of ancient vintage in Jewish life. After all, this is arguably exactly what the Mishnah did to the Torah when it arranged its material according to the *Shisha Sedarim* instead of the Torah order; this is exactly what Maimonides did to the Mishnah and Talmud when he arranged his *Mishneh Torah* according to his own conception of the categories of halakha, and exactly what the Tur and the Shulchan Arukh did to Maimonides by ignoring his arrangement and following their own fourfold model of halakhic categorization. Just as those previous "constructive theologians" did invisible conceptual work—one might even dare to say "critical" work—on their sources through the invention of new categories, our contemporary scholars also do normative work even when they prefer to foreground their conceptual and historical innovations. My point, however, is that this work is *necessary* in the first place—necessary because the ancient sources *do not* speak in any clear terms about the field or sphere of life we call "economic."

3. Modern Jewish Thought and the Apology for Jewish Economic Distinctiveness

That Jewish tradition lacks an explicitly demarcated discourse of economic reflection has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Derek Penslar, for example, notes that "Jewish civilization does not possess a tradition of systematic economic thinking," although he qualifies this observation by asserting that rabbinic and medieval sources did have "identifiable economic sensibilities."²⁷ Penslar also identifies the constraints that prevented such thought from emerging: "Before Jews could think about themselves in political economic terms, two things had to occur. Jewish economic life needed to free itself from halakhah, and Jews needed to conceive of themselves as integrally linked with the economy of their host societies."²⁸ In other words, *contra* Tamari, secularization and modernity were necessary for Jews to write in the genre of political economy. This hypothesis is strengthened by the dates and locations of the appearance of the first political-economic treatises written by Jews: the *Discorso circa il stato de gl'hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia* (1638), by Simone Luzzatto (1583–1663),

²³ Satlow also explicitly indicates that the volume takes inspiration from work like Tamari's: "drawing on an approach that seeks to recover meaningful ideas that can be considered outside of the specific historical contexts in which they were produced (for such an approach, see Tamari 1987), the goal of this volume is to encourage readers to grapple with the ideas that each text presents"; 3.

²⁴ There are some modern texts included as well, which generate less methodological dissonance insofar as they explicitly name the discourse in which they take part as economic.

²⁵ (Satlow 2018, p. 11).

²⁶ For Christian *comparanda*, see (Wood 2002). Wood's chapters include "Private Property vs. Communal Rights," "Wealth, Beggary, and Sufficiency," and "What is money?"

²⁷ (Penslar 2001, p. 52).

²⁸ (Ibid., p. 57).

a Venetian rabbi; the *Humble Addresses* (1655) to Oliver Cromwell, by the Dutch rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657); and the *Confusion de Confusiones* (1688) by Joseph Penso de la Vega (1650–1692), a Sephardi from a former New Christian family, living in Amsterdam. The first two are apologies, seeking to vindicate Jewish economic behavior and illustrate the usefulness of their activities to the Christian societies in which they lived or hoped to live. The third, however, is a treatment of the nature of the stock exchange that makes use of Old Testament references and imagery but is otherwise completely divorced from the Judaism of its author.²⁹

These stipulations on the conditions of the possibility of Jewish economic thinking, however, must be considered in the even larger context of what gives rise to the possibility of political economy (the early name for the discourse, before its nineteenth-century transformation into “economics”) at all. For political economy to emerge, it was first necessary that there be powerful states, that these states concern themselves with their relative levels of wealth in a manner that stretched beyond the ruler’s own household (the original signification of the Greek term *oikonomia* being the distribution of household wealth), and that wealth be considered subject to human action rather than purely the result of luck or divine providence. “By the eighteenth century,” as Keith Tribe writes of the German context, “the power of the ruler in a territorial state was understood to rest not on intrigue, but on economic welfare.”³⁰ It would have been impossible, as the scholar Joseph Lifshitz reminds us, for Jews to have developed an explicit systematic thought about political economy prior to these developments, which gave rise to the very concept of “the economy” as a manipulable sphere of political action.³¹

However, as the examples of Luzzatto, ben Israel, and de la Vega remind us, neither at the dawn of political economy nor in the full flower of its development a century later were Jews in a position to administer states. Thus, their economic writings were either tailored specifically to the Jewish situation, as we see once again in Moses Mendelssohn’s (1729–1786) defense of the usefulness of middlemen, or else they were framed in general ways but severed from their ties to Judaism, as with de la Vega and later David Ricardo (1772–1823).³² This pattern holds true throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In retrospect, it could hardly have been otherwise, since as many scholars have shown, discourse among Christians about Jewish emancipation and civil rights was always tied closely to Christian perceptions of the Jewish relationship to the economy, and in particular to a Christian notion of Jewish economic distinctiveness, manifest as a concentration in dubious professions such as peddling and moneylending. Jews, in return, strove to rebut these charges of Jewish economic wrongdoing, or else to place the blame for the distorted occupational profile of the Jewish population on Christian society itself. Such apologetic constraints did not favor the development of a robust discourse of Jewish political economy, based in Jewish sources and applied to society as a whole.

There are two exceptions to this rule, however, that point towards the eventual emergence of such a discourse. The first is found in the mid-nineteenth century, at the high tide of liberalism. Reform writers such as Ludwig Philippson, drawing on the earlier works of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars such as Leopold Zunz, portrayed Jews as innovators in credit and banking who had helped make possible the increasing standard of living in industrializing Europe. Promissory notes, bills of exchange, and even paper money were held out as Jewish “contributions” to economic modernity. Jewish sources were portrayed as the font of these contributions, Jewish history as their demonstration.³³ In the later nineteenth century, however, as reactionary anti-modernism spread and bourgeois liberalism came

²⁹ See the discussions of these texts in (Penslar 2001, pp. 59–68) and in (Karp 2008, pp. 21–37).

³⁰ (Tribe 1988, p. 1).

³¹ (Lifshitz 2012, pp. 1–2). The secularization criterion cited by Penslar is relevant in a Christian context as well, since as Wood’s *Medieval Economic Thought* shows, “economics” was inseparable from theology for Christians likewise.

³² For Mendelssohn’s defense of middlemen, see (Mendelssohn 1995, pp. 37–39); it was originally composed as a preface to a new translation of Ben Israel’s work. On Ricardo, who is not usually considered in discussions on Judaism and economy due to his conversion to Unitarianism and his work’s lack of Jewish content, I hope to say more in a future essay.

³³ On Philippson et al., see (Penslar 2001, pp. 84–89).

under attack from antisemites, Jewish commercialism once again appeared as a liability. This was the environment in which the second exception emerged: Zionism.

Although Zionist thought was originally resolutely secular, it was very early on that Ahad Ha'am criticized Theodor Herzl for having dreamed up a state of the Jews that was not actually a *Jewish* state (or, put another way, for trying to solve the "problem of the Jews" while failing to address the "problem of Judaism").³⁴ It was not long before creative young Orthodox Jews found ways around the opposition of the majority of the Orthodox world to Zionism, in pursuit of a radically new yet at the same time ancient ideal. As the religious-Zionist writer Ze'ev Yaavetz put it:

The sense of unity that dominates the spirit of our religion . . . embraces life in its entirety . . . only in the land of our fathers can our Torah branch out in its own way, without hindrance. For there it will be mistress . . . Only there will our Torah be able to live once again and restore its people to a real life, a life of complete unity.³⁵

The main vehicle for these ideals, in the early years of religious-Zionism, was the religious kibbutz movement, an outgrowth of the *Torah ve-Avodah* (Torah and labor) movement, itself a descendant of Hirsch's ideology *Torah im-derekh erez* (Torah with the way of the world). Although this movement was a minority within a minority within a minority, it saw itself as the very vanguard of Jewish life, precisely because it was pioneering the renewed application of Jewish law to economics in a way that could never be done in a Christian-majority society. Its discourse, nonetheless, drew on tropes that were common in liberal and socialist conversations of the time:

A revolution must take place in our life. The galut has moved us so far from the path of the Torah that today Torah . . . is invoked to battle against those Jews who seek to follow its path in full . . .

Only because of the terrible economic pressures were the parasitic life, loans upon interest, usury, commissions, and trade permitted. It is those who invoke the Torah against us who placed the people that practiced these professions along the "east wall" [of the synagogue, where prominent personages are seated] and looked down upon the ba'al melakhah [mere artisan] . . . the productive person who enjoyed the fruits of his own labor. And it is they who invoke the same religion to rebuke and censure those who struggle against . . . exploitation and refuse to allow it in our rejuvenated land . . .³⁶

For this leader of *Ha-poel ha-mizrachi* (The Religious-Zionist Worker, lit. the "eastern" worker), the financial innovations and occupations that seemed attractive to Philippson and his fellow nineteenth-century German bourgeois, and which in a moment of liberal dominance could be "sold" to Christians as evidence of Jewish assimilability, now seemed horrid once again. But the solution was at hand—not mere productivization alone, and not assimilation into Gentile society, but the full realization of the Torah in the Land of Israel, against *galut* Judaism. This full realization necessarily meant economic realization, as well—although in practice, the religious kibbutzniks took their cues from the secular kibbutzim, and exercised their halakhic creativity through confrontation with problems that emerged in the course of this life (e.g., farming activities such as milking cows and collecting eggs on the Sabbath; observing the Sabbatical year).³⁷

Ultimately, it is only in the last third of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first that a full-fledged attempt at a "Jewish political economy" really emerges (assuming that the existence of a still-small library of books can testify to this emergence having occurred).³⁸

³⁴ (Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz 2011, p. 585).

³⁵ Cited in (Fishman 1992, p. 52).

³⁶ Cited in (ibid., p. 60).

³⁷ (ibid., p. 119).

³⁸ See (Lifshitz 2004).

Sometimes, it takes a first-order form and sometimes, it takes a second-order one. Sometimes, it acknowledges its own novelty; more often, however, it goes about its business without reflecting on the conditions of its own possibility. Echoing the two earlier moments, these are: the existence of a Jewish state, on the one hand, and the existence of a relatively secure and affluent Jewish minority in a pluralistic liberal democracy, on the other.³⁹ It does what new Jewish genres have always done, namely, select and arrange traditional materials in a new way while claiming fidelity to the essential core of that tradition. And it does this in the conviction that despite any appearances to the contrary, Judaism really is—and always has been—about everything.

4. Conclusions

Having come full circle, I hope I have demonstrated the difficulties attendant to either working with the Weberian rationalization model or against it. Working “against” it demonstrates that the categories of modern sociological thinking (politics, culture, nation, economy) did not exist in ancient and medieval sources, and actually only strengthens the model, since it emphasizes the modern difference and the differentiation of these spheres in the modern period. I have only been able to briefly indicate how economics first becomes possible as a sphere of intersection for Jewish thought, and then second becomes a sphere that must be seen as intellectually and theologically contained within and subsumed by Judaism. Whether in first-order or second-order form, this is arguably a manifestation of Soloveitchik’s theme of “conquest”—on certain assumptions, it cannot be that Judaism either has nothing to say about “economics” or that it allows this new, modern sphere of life to dictate terms to it. Rather, Judaism must always already contain within itself the resources to encompass this subject, a claim that occasionally suffers extension into historical data that cannot substantiate it.

The relative neglect of economy as a sphere of Jewish thought, compared to politics, nationhood, and culture, is widely recognized in the secondary literature even if first-order thinkers are sometimes at pains to deny it. It is manifest in the recent publication dates of much of the literature I have cited in this essay. And it raises questions for scholars of Judaism and of religion more broadly who wish to be as reflexive as possible about their own relationship to both their own contemporary circumstances and to the sources they work with. These questions include: to what extent are scholarly depictions of the categories and sub-categories of “economics” influenced by trends in contemporary professional academic economics? To what extent should they be? Is it possible that historical scholarship today is as influenced by larger political-economic circumstances (recession, financial crisis, boom-and-bust cycles in capitalism) as we recognize it to have once been by the contest over Jewish statehood and sovereignty? And finally, what does it mean for our image of the premodern, integral Jewish community if it lacked not only the power to administer, but even the possibility to conceive of, political economy? A contrast with the more “political” categories of war and capital punishment may be instructive: premodern Jewish communities were well aware that they lacked these powers, which were retained by their Christian and Muslim rulers. But they could not have been aware that they lacked a power to articulate a political-economic theory that would conceptualize production and distribution throughout society, since their rulers also lacked such a theory. Such a theory must be distinguished from, even though it is related to, the powers to tax and to distribute funds, which the kehilla often did possess and did articulate rich and substantive thought about. Thinkers such as Tamari and Lifshitz today plumb Jewish discourses on those topics in the hopes of using them as building blocks for a larger theory. But the very existence of that project indicates its previous absence. It is not just a matter of the rabbis not writing systematically: the very subject matter of “economics”—in the sense of production and distribution decisions being made across societies by the combined results of individual self-interested choices in integrated markets—did not exist, which is

³⁹ Cf. for the American scene: (Jacobs 2010; Cohen 2012).

not true for politics. This complicates and challenges any claim that premodern Judaism had mastery of the public sphere, excluding only sovereignty.

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