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Emancipation through Consumption: Moses Mendelssohn and the Idea of Marketplace Citizenship

BY GIDEON REUVENI

Today concepts such as political consumerism and consumer citizenship have been developed in order to identify and display the significance of consumption both as an activity and as a site of political action.¹ As substantiated, for example, in Elizabeth Cohen's work on the emergence of the Consumers' Republic in the United States, this approach represents an epochal claim about the changing relationship between state, society and consumption after World War II. According to Cohen, in the second half of the twentieth century a unique alliance was formed in the United States between policy makers, business and labor leaders, along with many ordinary Americans, all adopting a strategy for reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values by promoting the expansion of mass consumption.² Victoria de Grazia develops a similar argument for post-war Europe. In her study *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth Century Europe* she suggests that the struggle between American free market ideology and the planned economy of the Soviet Union gave way to a new European regime of mass consumption that was mainly conceived as a political matter involving rights and democracy.³ Thus the so-called Consumers' Republic epitomizes a state in which national interest not only became bound up

¹The literature on these issues is constantly growing. I will therefore mention only a few titles that I found useful for my work: Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, Oxford 2001; Michele Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, New York 2003; Jörn Lala and Sighard Neckel (eds.), *Politisierter Konsum—Konsumierte Politik*, Wiesbaden 2006; Dhavan V. Shah, Lewis Friedland, Douglas M. Mcleod and Micheller R. Nelson (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption—The Consumption of Politics* [special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611], Los Angeles 2007; Kate Soper and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Citizenship and Consumption*, New York 2008. See also the special issue of *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2007).

²Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York 2004.

³Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Mass. 2005.

with mass consumption, but the very notion of citizenship was interlaced with consumership. As Cohen cogently observes, the postwar era witnessed the triumph of the “ideal of the customer as citizen who simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming.”⁴ Yet the history of what Cohen, de Grazia, and others identify with the concept of consumer citizenship is based on a century-long trend of entwining these notions and making them central to the guiding principle of a market-oriented society in which the members of modern states are expected to realize personal desire and civic obligation by, amongst other things, consuming.

This essay will explore the interface between these ideas in the context of the struggle for Jewish emancipation. Focusing on Moses Mendelssohn’s economic views and the debate about Jewish compatibility with modernity, I will seek to demonstrate how the use of the language of free enterprise and consumer choice was part of an effort to imagine and constitute a new phase in Jewish history epitomized by political recognition and social integration.⁵ This reading of the struggle for Jewish emancipation is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s observation that “the emergence of the economic field marks the appearance of a universe in which social agents can admit to themselves and admit publicly that they have interests [...], a universe in which they can not only do business, but also admit to themselves that they are there to do business, that is, to conduct themselves in a self-interested manner.”⁶ In the Jewish case, the notion of interest appears almost interchangeable with the concept of rights, making the association between the free market and the idea of citizenship one of the hallmarks of the struggle for Jewish emancipation.⁷

THE MARKETPLACE BETWEEN CIVILITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Historians trace the emergence of the market, or the ‘economy’ as a discrete category in public discourse, to the development of new concepts on human conduct and the foundations of the social body that evolved in a particular time and place—Europe, during the eighteenth century. Thus, for example, Albert Hirschman’s seminal discussion of the opposition between the passions and the interests reveals how political thinkers of the early modern period sought to restrain what they considered to be the overwhelming power of sovereigns, both in domestic and international matters, through the expansion of the market.⁸ By the mid-eighteenth century, Hirschman notes, “it became the conventional

⁴Lizabeth Cohen, ‘Citizens and Consumers in the US in the Century of Mass Consumption,’ in: Dauntton, and Hilton, *The Politics of Consumption*, p. 214.

⁵Victor Karady, *The Jews of Europe in the Modern Era*, Budapest 2004, p. 26.

⁶Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Stanford 1994, pp. 105-106.

⁷Uriel Tal, ‘German-Jewish Social Thought in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,’ in: Werner E. Mosse, (ed.) *Revolution and Evolution 1848 in German-Jewish History*, Tübingen 1981, pp. 299-328.

⁸Albert Hirschman, *The Passion and the Interest: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton 1977. For more on this see also Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England*, Princeton 1978.

wisdom [...] that commerce was a civilizing agent of considerable power and range.”⁹

According to this reading the language of free enterprise and consumer goods was designed to promote civility and facilitate the idea of participation and free citizenship. Even the stock exchange was seen as “a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind.” So Voltaire, who in his *Letters Concerning The English Nation* famously note that on the floor trading “the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together, as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of infidel to none but bankrupts.”¹⁰ Notwithstanding his otherwise hostile views Jews, Voltaire concludes his comments on the Royal Exchange in London with the observation that “if one religion only were allowed in England, the Government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people would cut one another’s throats; but as there are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace.”¹¹

Central to the development of such views was the concept of interest, a concept that as we approach the nineteenth century becomes ever more closely associated with that of material prosperity and the augmentation of fortune. As demonstrated, for example, in Jeremy Bentham’s 1787 treatise entitled ‘Defence of Usury,’ this change did not escape the observant eyes of contemporaries who explained it as an upshot of the improved accessibility of a growing number of people to wealth.¹² According to historian Benjamin Nelson the institutionalization of the credit system epitomizes a movement from a social order that is based on the notion of exclusive fraternalism to the impartial social relationship of modern industrial society: a development he felicitously depicts as a shift “from tribal brotherhood to universal otherhood.”¹³

With the introduction of new economic doctrines that gave precedence to production over transaction at the end of the eighteenth century, the status of commerce rapidly declined. What is perhaps most significant about this development is not that it merely gave way to rival views of the market society, but that it reveals how the economy became the focal point of social processes and political arrangements. As Susan Buck-Morss explains, acknowledging that “the

⁹ Albert Hirschman, *Rival Views of the Market Society and other Recent Essays*, New York 1986, p. 107; see also David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, New York 2003, pp. 165-210.

¹⁰ Voltaire, *Letters Concerning The English Nation*, first published in 1731, here from <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/voltaire/letters-on-england.pdf>, accessed 5 May 2014, p. 24. On Voltaire and antisemitism see Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, New York 1990. For a more nuanced reading of Voltaire views on Jews, see Harvey Chisick, ‘Ethics and History in Voltaire’s Attitudes toward the Jews,’ *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2002), pp. 577–600.

¹¹ Voltaire, *Letters Concerning The English Nation*.

¹² Bentham, Jeremy. *Defence of Usury*. London: Payne and Foss. 1818. Library of Economics and Liberty [Online] available from <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthUs.html>; accessed 14 June 2014. For more on his general attitude to Jews, see Lea Campos Boralevi, ‘Jeremy Bentham and the Jews,’ *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 22-28. On Voltaire and antisemitism see Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, New York 1990.

¹³ Benjamin N. Nelson, *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*, Princeton 1949.

exchange of goods, rather than denoting the edge of community, is capable of functioning as the fundament of collective life necessitated the discovery that within the polity such a thing as an “economy” exists.”¹⁴ The “economy” was thus formed as a new discursive object in the context of the emergence of the nation state and the development of new concepts regarding the relationship between men, society and nature.¹⁵ Karl Polanyi notably termed this development *The Great Transformation*, in which “human society had become an accessory of the economic system.”¹⁶ This transformation also shaped the ways Jews were perceived in modern societies.

RIGHTS AND UTILITY

It is well known that the general image of Jews is overloaded with tropes and motifs taken from the sphere of economics, and for good reason. In pre-modern Europe, Jews were bound into the estate system as a quasi-independent guild of commercial people, so that their economic transactions were closely associated with their identity as Jews, as was their trustworthiness as business partners in general. Knowing that both their right of residency and their well-being was contingent on their economic utility, European Jews adopted, and at times even promoted, modes of thinking about Jews in economic terms. Indeed, Jewish discourse, especially of the mercantilist age, was congested with economic threads.¹⁷ A revealing example is that of Menasseh Ben Israel’s letter to Oliver Cromwell written in 1655, in which he pleaded for Jewish resettlement in England. Jews had been expelled from the British Isles in 1290. Ben Israel’s petition for the readmission of Jews was based to a large extent on economic thinking in terms of profit and utility. Ben Israel promoted the Jews as proficient and innovative merchants who would advance the national economy. According to Ben Israel, what distinguished Jewish business practices was that the Jews remained economically active long after their non-Jewish counterparts had settled down and realized their working capital in ownership of real estate. Prosperous Jewish merchants, Ben Israel proclaimed, would not cease to develop their businesses and would thus continue to benefit the economy of the state over a longer period than would their non-Jewish contenders.¹⁸ Ben Israel was not the first to overtly praise the Jews’ economic

¹⁴ Susan Buck-Morris, ‘Envisioning Capital: Economy on Display,’ *Critical Theory*, 21 (1995), p. 439.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* For more on this idea of the invention of the economy see Stephen Gudeman, *Economics as Culture Models and Metaphors of Livelihood*, London 1986; Thomas L. Haskell, Richard F. Teichgraber (eds.), *The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays*, Cambridge 1993.

¹⁶ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, New York 1944, p. 75.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive and stimulating discussion of the Jewish economic discourse see Jonathan Karp, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Ideology and Emancipation in Europe 1638-1848*, Cambridge 2008. On Jews and mercantilism Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550-1750*, London 1998.

¹⁸ Lucien Wolf (ed.), *Menasseh Ben Israel’s Mission to Oliver Cromwell: Being a Reprint of the Pamphlets Published by Menasseh Ben Israel to Promote the Re-admission of the Jews to England 1649-1656*, London 1901; also

merits. In an appeal to the authorities of the city of Venice in the year 1638, Rabbi Simone Luzzatto argued for the Jewish right of residency by exalting the extraordinary capability of the Jews for commerce, declaring that “wherever Jews have settled, business and commerce have flourished.”¹⁹ Yet, unlike Ben Israel who argued for the readmission of Jews to England, Luzzatto pleaded on behalf of Venetian Jewry to prevent their expulsion.

Luzzatto’s discourse was written whilst Venice was declining in importance as a port. The discourse is based on the observation that the Venetian-Christian middle class shunned commercial activity, leaving this area of economic life to foreigners. Based on this view, Luzzatto seeks to convince the Venetian authorities that it is in the city’s interest to foster local Jewish merchants rather than allowing foreign merchant groups to settle in Venice. Luzzatto not only questions the loyalty of such groups of foreigners but also warns that since these merchants are rooted in the places of their origin, and given that their interests are purely financial, they are likely to evade local taxation and, after accumulating wealth, to return to their home countries, taking their capital with them to the detriment of Venice.²⁰

The differences between these two addresses notwithstanding, in bolstering the Jewish commercial aptitude, both Luzzatto and Ben Israel depict Jews as the embodiment of modern *homo economicus*, thus boosting the Jews’ economic utility. In so doing they not only protect Jewish interests but also endorse the so-called *doux-commerce* thesis, according to which there is a positive link between commercial activity and civil society, whereby commerce is perceived as a powerful vehicle of civilization.²¹ It thus appears that in the age of mercantilism, Jewish economic sensitivities were characterized by a strong ethos of utility; a positive attitude to trade; and a favourable view of the free market economy.²²

Not only Jews highlighted the “Jewish contribution” to economic progression. In the context of the debates regarding readmission of Jews to England, Sir Josiah Child commented as follows: “subtiller the Jews are, and the more Trades they pry

available on <http://www.judaica-frankfurt.de/content/titleinfo/675126>, accessed 3 May 2014. On Ben Israel and his appeal see: Ismar Schorsch, ‘From Messianism to Realpolitik: Menasseh ben Israel and the Readmission of the Jews to England,’ *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978), pp. 187-208; Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulan, and Richard Henry Popkin (eds.), *Menasseh Ben Israel and his World*, Leiden 1989; João Ricardo Faria, ‘The Readmission of the Jews to England: The Mercantilist View,’ *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* vol. 6, no. 4 (1999), pp. 513-522.

¹⁹ Benjamin Ravid, *Economics and Toleration in Seventeenth Century Venice: The Background and Context of the Discorso of Simone Luzzatto*, Jerusalem 1978, p. 66. On the connection between the two addresses see also Benjamin Ravid, ‘How profitable the nation of the Jews Are: The “Humble Addresses” of Menasseh ben Israel and the “Discorso” of Simone Luzzatto, Menasseh ben Israel and the “Discorso” of Simone Luzzatto,’ in: Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski (eds.), *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*, Durham 1982, pp. 159-180.

²⁰ Isaac E. Barzilay, ‘John Toland’s borrowings from Simone Luzzatto: Luzzatto’s “Discourse on the Jews of Venice” (1638), the major source of Toland’s writing on the naturalization of the Jews in GB and Ireland (1714),’ *Jewish Social Studies* 31 (1969), p. 78.

²¹ On this see also Hirschman, *The Passion and the Interest*, pp. 67-114.

²² Derek J. Penslar, *Shylock’s Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe*, Berkeley 2001, p. 66.

into while they live here, the more they are like to increase Trade, and the more they do that, the better it is for the Kingdom in general, though the worse for the English merchant.”²³ The French enlightener Charles de Montesquieu, who avowed as a general rule that “wherever the ways on men are gentle there is commerce; and wherever there is commerce, there the ways of men are gentle,” gave Jews credit for creating this civilizing form of modern commerce.²⁴ In a chapter in *The Spirit of the Laws* (first published in 1748) entitled ‘How Commerce Broke Through the Barbarism of Europe,’ Montesquieu proclaims: “the Jews invented letters of exchange; commerce, by this method, became capable of eluding violence, and of maintaining everywhere its ground; the richest merchant having none but invisible effects, which he could convey imperceptibly wherever he pleased.”²⁵ And the English poet and essayist Joseph Addison famously characterized the Jews as “pegs and nails in a great building, which, though they are but little valued in themselves, are absolutely necessary to keep the whole frame together.”²⁶

Towards the end of the eighteenth century both the general approach to trade and attitudes toward Jews and their position in the social and economic fabric began to change. While in the early modern period the association of Jews with commerce facilitated a positive image of Jewish economic qualities, from the end of the eighteenth century onward the depiction of Jews as backward, unproductive, and a group immersed in stiff religious tradition becomes more prevalent. Jonathan Karp has indicated that “this shift in the perception of Jews was directly linked to changing economic doctrines in the period of the Enlightenment, which clearly reflected, if not informed, a revision of the approach toward the Jews.”²⁷ The irony of this new “modern” consciousness is that despite the triumph of capitalism, with which Jews were so closely associated, and the pre-eminence of the ‘economy’ as a discursive category, in modern times a recognition of Jewish backwardness seemed to replace the earlier perception of the Jews as a progressive people and indeed modernizers. These conflicting depictions of the Jewish economic makeup and the interplay between Jews and modernity became the focus of a new discourse on Jews and Jewishness since the Enlightenment.²⁸

The nineteenth century is thus haunted by discussion about the nature of Jewish difference and the question of whether Jews were able to integrate and become “useful” members of modern society. Internalizing the supposition that Jews had to

²³ Quoted in Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism*, p. 160. See also David S. Katz, *Philosemitism and the readmission of the Jews to England, 1603-1655*, Oxford 1982.

²⁴ Cited in Hirschman, *The Passion and the Interest*, p. 60.

²⁵ Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the laws*, available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MonLaws.html>, accessed on May 15 2014. For further discussion see, Arnold Ages, ‘Montesquieu and the Jews,’ *Romanische Forschungen* 81, 1/2 (1969), pp. 214-219.

²⁶ Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, no. 495, 27 September 1712, p. 202.

²⁷ Jonathan Karp, ‘Can Economic History Date the Inception of Jewish Modernity?’ in: Gideon Reuveni and Sarah Wobick-Segev (eds.), *The Economy in Jewish History: New Perspectives on the Interrelationship between Ethnicity and Economic Life*, New York 2010, pp. 23-42.

²⁸ For an insightful and comprehensive discussion see mainly the first and fourth chapters of Penslar, *Shylock’s Children*.

transform themselves to become compatible with modern life, calls to reform the Jewish way of life were voiced both from within and without Jewish circles. In this context, evaluations of the Jews economic position, together with different schemes for regenerating Jewish society, were debated vehemently.

MOSES MENDELSSOHN AND THE IDEA OF MARKETPLACE CITIZENSHIP

Christian Wilhelm Dohm's treatise *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (On the Civic Improvement of the Jews), published in 1781, is perhaps the best-known example of these discussions.²⁹ According to Dohm, Jews could be tolerated only after going through a form of economic or social conversion, in the course of which they were supposed to move away from commerce and take up more physical and thus "productive" occupations in the crafts and agriculture. Around a century after Dohm first introduced his plan for a radical restructuring of Jewish economic makeup, the Zionist movement propagated similar lines for the "normalization" of Jewish life; a process that among other things aimed to invert the occupational pyramid of Jews so that its base would consist of "healthy" agricultural and manual labor instead of what the socialist Zionist Ber Borochov, for example, called the *luft* economics" of Diaspora Jews.³⁰ Not all Jews or non-Jews shared this view regarding the supremacy of production over commerce, or for that matter linked the process of emancipation with the reform of Jewish economic life. Perhaps the most prominent representative of this latter approach is the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn.

It is in the context of the debate over Dohm's stipulations for the "amelioration" of the civil state of the Jews that we learn about Mendelssohn's economic views.³¹ In his preface to the German translation of Manasseh Ben Israel *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, Mendelssohn notes, "in some modern publications, there is an echo of the objection: 'the Jews are an unproductive people; they neither till the ground, cultivate the arts, nor exercise mechanical trades [...] but only carry and transport

²⁹ For a general overview of the debates see for example: Robert Liberles, 'From Toleration to *Verbesserung*: German and English Debates on the Jews in the Eighteenth Century,' *Central European History*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1989), pp. 37-48; Jonathan M. Hess *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity*, New Haven 2002 Carol Iancu, 'The Emancipation and Assimilation of the Jews in the Political Discourse Regarding the Granting of Citizenship to the French Jews during the French Revolution,' *Studia Judaica*, 18 (2010), pp. 89-115.

³⁰ Ber Borochov, 'The Economic Development of the Jewish People,' available at <http://www.angelfire.com/il2/borochov/eco.html>, accessed 20 May 2014. On Borochov economic thinking see Jerry Z. Muller, *Capitalism and the Jews*, Princeton 2010, pp. 189-218. For more general discussion of the Zionist view see Mitchell B. Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity*, Stanford 2000. On the notion of 'Luftmensch' see Nicolas Berg, *Luftmenschen: Zur Geschichte einer Metapher*, Göttingen 2008.

³¹ See also David Friedländer, *Briefe über die Moral des Handels, voran ein Gewissensfall im Handel, nebst einem Schreiben v. Mendelssohn*, Berlin 1817; also available at <http://www.judaica-frankfurt.de/content/titleinfo/424142>, accessed 16 June 2014.

the raw or wrought commodities of various countries from one to another. They are, therefore, mere consumers, who cannot but be a tax upon the producers.”³² Mendelssohn discards this view outright. He claims that there is nothing innately debasing about the nature of Jewish traditional occupations.³³ On the contrary, Mendelssohn saw the Jewish concentration in commerce as particularly useful for both state and society. This perspective was based on Mendelssohn’s fundamental rejection of what eventually became a prevailing distinction in modern times between “productive” and “unproductive” labour.³⁴ For according to the philosopher, by mediating between producers and consumers, merchants perform a crucial social and economic function. As middlemen, they supply consumers with goods and thus not only provide an important service for manufacturer and customer alike but also stimulate production by expanding the market. In Mendelssohn’s words, through the middleman, “commodities become more useful, more in demand, and also cheaper.”³⁵ In this sense, the brokers are as “productive” as the producers. To illustrate his point Mendelssohn asks his reader to “imagine a workman who is obliged to go himself to the agriculturist for the raw material, and also to take it himself to the warehouse-man in a manufactured state,” and to compare him to “a workman” who works with an intermediate dealer.³⁶ The latter system is depicted not only as more efficient, promoting “real industry,” but also as enabling a better and happier life “without extraordinary exertion of strength” for both producer and consumer.³⁷

This positive view of commerce rests upon Mendelssohn’s approach to the distinction between “doing” [*Tun*] and “making” [*Machen*] as two corresponding aspects of productivity. “Not he alone who labors with his hands,” he proclaims, “but, generally, whoever does, promotes, occasions, or facilitates anything that may tend to the benefit or comfort of his fellow-creatures, deserves to be called producer.”³⁸

Mendelssohn’s approach is further grounded in his thinking about the reciprocity between the state and the market economy. Unlike the philosophers of the mercantile age such as Montesquieu, who commended commerce primarily as an agent of civilization, Mendelssohn also accentuated the positive correlation between economic expansion and civic freedom. In citing Holland as a model of a commercial society, he sought to illuminate how the combination of economic and political freedom facilitated prosperity. A thriving economy such as that of the Netherlands, he propounded, could only unfold when allowed to develop freely. That is why Mendelssohn called upon governments “to abolish monopolies,

³² Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: A Treatise on Ecclesiastical Authority and Judaism*, 2 vols. Translated by M. Samuels, London 1838, vol. 1, p. 94.

³³ This section is based on Jonathan Karp, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce*, pp. 122-134.

³⁴ For a brief overview on the history of this distinction, which came to play a central role in Marxist thought, see Denis Patrick O’Brien, *The Classical Economists Revisited*, Princeton 2004, pp. 274-282.

³⁵ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, p. 96.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

exclusive and privileged rights; to accord equal rights and freedom to the smallest jobber and the largest commercial firm; in a word, to promote competition of every kind between middlemen; to encourage rivalry between them so that the price of things finds its equilibrium [...] [allowing] every consumer [...] to benefit without excessive effort, from the industry of others.”³⁹ According to Jonathan Karp what appears here as a state-of-the-art political economy is firmly based on Mendelssohn’s reception of the Scottish Enlightenment.⁴⁰ Yet, while Karp underscores Adam Smith’s influence on Mendelssohn’s reprimand of the productive/nonproductive distinction, I would like to draw attention to another component of Smith’s thinking that I believe had a profound impact on Mendelssohn’s deliberations.

Challenging both older mercantile and more recent physiocratic doctrines, Smith sees the significance of consumption as the powerhouse of modern economy, displaying it as a positive force that stokes production and increases the wealth and well-being of the nation. “Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production,” Smith affirms in *The Wealth of Nations*.⁴¹ For Smith “this maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it.”⁴² It is with this declaration, Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton argue, that the “consuming individual began to shape [...] the market, and ultimately the modern liberal state.”⁴³

Conflating the notion of citizenship with the capacity to act as free independent consumers and producers also seems to underline Mendelssohn’s approach. Following Smith, Mendelssohn argues that “the largest and most voluble portion of the state consists of mere consumers.”⁴⁴ The well-being of a state, he asserts, as well as of every individual in it, “requires many things [*Dinge*] both sensual and intellectual, many goods [*Güter*] both material and spiritual; and he who, more or less directly or indirectly, contributes towards them, cannot be called mere consumer; he does not eat his bread for nothing; he produces something in return.”⁴⁵ Mendelssohn therefore rejects the notion of the passive useless consumer. For him consumption is an activity integral to the social process comprised by exchange and the ability to use different types of goods.⁴⁶ In his study *Jerusalem, or, On religious power and Judaism* he blatantly affirms that “the authority [*Befugnis*]—

³⁹ Cited in Karp, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, available at <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/adam-smith/wealth-nations.pdf>, accessed 15 June 2014, p. 537.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 538.

⁴³ Daunton and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, pp. 99-100. Compare this with Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 70.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴⁶ He qualifies this approach by stating “This ability is called ‘moral’ if it is consistent with the laws of wisdom and goodness. And the things [*Dinge*] that can be used in this way are called *goods* [*Güter*]. So man has a right to certain goods, i.e. certain means of happiness, so long as this right doesn’t contradict the laws of wisdom and goodness.” From Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism* online version available at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/mendjeru.pdf>, accessed 15 June 2013.

i.e. the moral ability [*das sittliche Vermögen*]⁴⁷—to use things [*Dinge*] as a means for promoting one's happiness is called a right," and it is this right that "constitutes man's natural freedom."⁴⁷ What I find most fascinating about Mendelssohn's approach is not only how he amalgamates the language of objects (*Dinge*, *Güter*, *Vermögen*) with the language of morals, but also the strong connection he establishes between the two and the notion of happiness; an association that comprises one of the hallmarks of the spirit of modern consumerism.⁴⁸

It is upon this recognition of the significance of consumption, I would like to suggest, that Mendelssohn develops his positive approach to economic competition as a positive social force promoting the concept of rights together with social and political tolerance. "Only through competition and rivalry," he writes in his response to Dohm, "through unlimited freedom and equality of rights among all buyers and sellers—be they of whichever estate, appearance, or religion they may—only through these invaluable advantages do all things acquire their value."⁴⁹ To be sure, Mendelssohn was well aware that some people, Jews included, might seek to gain inappropriate benefits or even abuse the open marketplace. He was also mindful of the accusations against the alleged unscrupulous Jewish trade methods. "These are great evils," Mendelssohn noted, "which crush the producer's industry and the consumer's enterprise, and which should be counteracted by laws and by the police regulations."⁵⁰ In other words, Mendelssohn did not think that the struggle against commercial malpractices should in any way undermine the idea of a free marketplace economy. Far from it; he believed that only free competition and economic rivalry could ensure people's trust in the marketplace. Writing on the eve of the modern age, Mendelssohn depicted the prohibitions, monopolies, and economic restrictions of his day as the main aggravators of commercial ill practices. In so doing he established a strong reciprocity between the idea of a *Rechtsstaat* (a constitutional state) and the free market economy. According to him, only in a state that is based on the idea of freedom and equal civil liberty, rivalry and competition will be able to regulate social relations and work for the benefit of both consumers and producers. A similar view was propagated by the Hamburg lawyer and politician Gabriel Riesser (1806-1863), one of the most prominent advocators of Jewish emancipation in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Arguing "from a purely legal standpoint, from simple principles of national economy that look toward

⁴⁷ A modified translation from *ibid.*, pp. 9 and 13.

⁴⁸ Again here it is interesting to point to the influence of Adam Smith, who wrote in the *Wealth of Nations*, p. 70, "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably: well fed, clothed, and lodged." More broadly on the spirit of consumerism: Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, London 1987.

⁴⁹ This translation is cited in: David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*, London 1996, p. 114.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵¹ Moshe Rinnot, 'Gabriel Riesser: Fighter for Jewish Emancipation,' *Leo Beack Institute Yearbook* 7 (1962), pp. 11-38.

general utility;” Riesser challenged the basis of the condemnations of the Jews economic position and their alleged commercial malpractices as impediments for emancipation.⁵² In his 1831 ‘Defense of the Civil Equality of the Jews’ Riesser demonstrates how such views “frequently . . . advances the interests of the few who hope for advantage from excluding the Jews from competition—at the cost of consumers as a whole who stand to gain from that competition, since they are absolutely authorized to choose freely—and which [tendency] attempts to disguise this intention under all manner of pretenses.”⁵³ Relying on the writings of Ignaz von Rudhart to support his claim about the economic usefulness of Jewish hawkers, Riesser seems to corroborate Mendelssohn proclamation that even “the pettiest trafficking Jew is not a mere consumer, but a useful inhabitant (citizen, I must say), of the state—a real producer.”⁵⁴ It thus appears that Riesser like Mendelssohn before him equated civil rights with consumer choices, suggesting that economic and civic freedom are inextricably linked.

As noted at the outset of this essay, this association between rights and goods becomes more prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century. To be sure, mass consumption was a nineteenth and early twentieth century phenomenon connected with urbanization, rising living standards, and the developments of new technologies that significantly improved the production, dissemination, and accessibility to goods for all members of society. Despite the emergence of a new consumer culture, there are no major signs indicating that the notion of the marketplace as the key site of consumption influenced the social and economic thinking of the period.⁵⁵ This is most definitely the case in the relevant Jewish discourse. Although as we have seen, for Mendelssohn the principle of consumer sovereignty constituted an integral part of his idea of citizenship, grounding the claim for Jewish rights in the close interdependence between producers and consumers and the Jewish role in the process, later Jewish thinkers, Riesser excluded, did not seem to attach the same significance to consumption in the context of the struggle for emancipation. Given Jewish clustering in consumer-oriented businesses, it is, however, difficult not to discern a link between what seems to be a Jewish commitment to a *laissez faire* economy and the spirit of modern consumerism.

⁵² Gabriel Riesser, *Vertheidigung der bürgerlichen Gleichstellung der Juden gegen die Entwürfe des Herrn Dr. H. E. G. Paulus: Den gesetzgebenden Versammlungen Deutschlands gewidmet* (Altona: Johann Friedrich Hammerich, 1831), p. 118. The translation is based on Excerpts from the Pamphlet by Gabriel Riesser proposing the Emancipation of the Jews (1831) available at the German History in Documents and Images <http://germanhistorydocs.ghdic.org/sub.document.cfm?documentid=34&language=english>, accessed 10 June 2014.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, p. 99. Riesser mainly cites Ignaz von Rudhart, *Über den Zustand des königreichs Baiern nach amtlichen Quellen*, Stuttgart 1827, pp. 63-89.

⁵⁵ Donald Winch, ‘The Problematic Status of the Consumer in Orthodox Economic Thought,’ in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, Oxford 2006, pp. 31-51, here p. 43; Jean-Christophe Agnew, ‘“Coming up for Air” Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective,’ in: John Brewer, and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, New York 1993, pp. 19-39.

THE MARKETPLACE AND JEWISH AFFIRMATION

German Jewish periodicals such as *Die Neuzeit* in Vienna and the *German Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* openly propagated a free market economy as inherently valuable and as a basis for Jewish integration. It was claimed that Jews, who for centuries had been forced into commerce, finally found themselves in an advantageous position in a world that was becoming increasingly commercialized.⁵⁶ So Ludwig Philippson (1811-1889), Rabbi of Magdeburg and chief editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, who after the dismay of the 1848 revolutions, saw the marketplace and especially industrial development as the venue and new fundament for emancipation.⁵⁷ Plans such as those of the Jewish relief organization *Alliance Israélite Universelle* to establish an agricultural colony in Palestine in order to “reawaken the taste for work in a nation so long disinherited” were sharply rebuked as erroneous and a total waste of money.⁵⁸

Philippson’s denunciation of schemes to reform the Jewish economic makeup were based on his reading of Mosaic social legislation as an endorsement of occupational freedom and modern ideas about the free market. In an article published under the title “The industrial Mission of the Jew,” Philippson ascribed the great contribution and social mission of the Jews to their role as initiators of the modern banking system, without which the modern state and industry could not have developed.⁵⁹ In the last section of his article he further explains that the main characteristic of the Middle Ages was exclusion. Religion, nationality, origin, status, vocation - everything was exclusionary, rendering a shredded society with Jews on the bottom rung. According to Philippson, the marginal position of Jews in pre-modern times should be read as an avatar of the opposition against the medieval social system, disposing Jews to advocate human rights, individual liberty and civil society, all of which he hoped would be achieved by the development of a modern industrial state and a free market economy.

In another article initially published in a general business journal, Philippson rhetorically asks whether the merchant class is inclined to be more liberal in its political convictions. Proclaiming that commercial business is cosmopolitan in its

⁵⁶ On this Approach see for example *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentum* (21.2.1853), pp. 103-104; (16.12.1862), pp. 738-740; (15.1.1867), pp. 42-44.

⁵⁷ *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentum* (21.1.1856), p. 43.

⁵⁸ *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentum* (2.2.1869), p. 92. The newspaper continue holding this position into the twentieth century. For example, in an editorial from May 29, 1908 it was argued that “a minority like us” could not afford to have a large proletariat and that Jews should concentrate on free professions in order sustain their existence as a group. For an interesting discussion of the Jews as commercial people see also Sigmund Mayer, ‘Die Juden als Handelsvolk in der Geschichte,’ in: idem., *Ein jüdischer Kaufmann 1831–1911. Lebenserinnerungen*, Leipzig 1911, pp. 360-400; Max Eschlbacher, ‘Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Jude,’ *Im deutschen Reich*, 10 (1909), pp. 551-557.

⁵⁹ Ludwig Philippson, ‘Die industrielle Mission der Juden,’ *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (23.7.1861), pp. 423-425, (30.7.1861), pp. 439-442, (6.8.1861), pp. 457-459. For an elaborate discussion of Philippson position see Penlar, *Shylock’s Children*, pp. 146-148. On Jews and banking: Gideon Reuveni, ‘Geldverleiher, Großunternehmer und Angestellte: Jüdische Bankiers Ein Überblick,’ in: Beate Borowka-Clausberg (ed.) *Salomon Heine in Hamburg-Geschäft und Gemeinsinn*, Göttingen 2013, pp. 120-131.

nature, he notes: "Since the merchant has to get his goods from all regions and countries and ship them there, he may have no condemnation against nations and classes. Since he has to seek the best sources and distribution channels for his goods, he knows neither friend nor foe."⁶⁰ Philippson, like Mendelssohn, considered economic competition a constructive mechanism invigorating business and regulating social relations. The only enemy of the businessmen, he concluded, took the form of obstacles to movement, monopolies, and special privileges constraining free trade. An economy, he argued, could only flourish under a liberal and non-biased political system and vice versa.⁶¹ With this approach Philippson continues a pre-modern tradition of seeing the merchant as more receptive and enlightened than the craftsman or farmer, with the difference that a demand for political rights is now attached to this claim. In a Jewish framework, this meant that Philippson recognized that competition could only serve the interest of a minority group specializing in commerce if it constituted a transparent and stable regime embedded in state structures: structures providing protection and a guarantee that the idea of free enterprise would not conflict with collective wants only inadequately registered by market signals.⁶²

In the second half of the Nineteenth-Century Jewish specialization in business, particularly as reflected in economic success, became a source of Jewish pride and recognition. An example of this type of economic triumphalism is offered by Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891), perhaps the most prominent nineteenth century Jewish historian, who extolled Jewish business acumen and wealth as a source of economic flowering and upturn. "Is it not wonderful," he asked rhetorically in his 'Letters to an English Lady' from 1883, "that the great power of capital is in the hands of the Jews?"⁶³ Graetz saw the triumphant career of the Jews in business as nothing less than evidence for the working of the hand of God and the balanced justice of history.⁶⁴

At the end of the century, the belief in the *laissez faire* economy as a positive force regulating society also informed the work of liberal Jewish organizations such as the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith (the *Centralverein*) which was founded in 1893 to represent Jewish interests and to combat

⁶⁰ Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentum, (16.12.1862), pp. 738

⁶¹ Philippson, 'Die industrielle Mission der Juden', (6.8.1861), p. 458. Philippson develops this idea in his 'Das Judentum im Staat und in der Gesellschaft,' Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentum (14.9.1869), pp. 735-740; (21.9.1869), pp. 758-762. For general discussion of the political orientation of German Jews in the nineteenth century, Jacob Toury, *Die politischen Orientierungen der Juden in Deutschland: Von Jena bis Weimar*, Tübingen 1966; For the antisemitic critique of capitalism Matthew Lange, *Antisemitic Elements in the Critique of Capitalism in German Culture: 1850-1933*, Bern 2007.

⁶² More broadly on this point see Frank Tentmann, 'National Identity and Consumer Politics: Free Trade and Tariff Reform,' in Patrick O'Brien and Donald Winch (eds.), *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience, 1688-1914*, Oxford 2002, pp. 215-242.

⁶³ Heinrich Greartz, *Briefwechsel einer englische Dame*, Stuttgart 1883, p. 31.

⁶⁴ On this see also Heinrich Greartz, *Geschichte der Juden*, 11 vols., Leipzig 1853-75, vol. 1, pp. 223-228; vol. 5., pp. 206-208; vol. 10., p. 2.

antisemitism.⁶⁵ One of the underlining premises of the fight against antisemitism was that “the Jewish question is not simply a religious or racial matter, but a question of economic rivalry.” (*Die Judenfrage ist keine Religions, keine Rassenfrage, sondern eine Frage der wirtschaftlichen Konkurrenz*)⁶⁶ In the post-emancipation period the *Centralverein* expressed the position that legal protection and political rights alone could not guarantee Jewish endurance.⁶⁷ As Derek Penslar insightfully notes a prevalent view, at least amongst members of the *Centralverein*, was that Jewish “prosperity and viability, now depended on the fortunes of economic liberalism.”⁶⁸ This approach becomes even more prevalent in the context of the struggle against the economic boycott of Jews, particularly in the period after the First World War.⁶⁹ As late as 19 January 1933, the *German Jewish press* triumphantly reported that the German state finally recognized the seriousness of the boycott situation and would now call on the police force to act against this kind of “disturbance of peace and order” (*Störung der Ruhe und Ordnung*). According to such reports, the decision was based on an understanding that the frequent and uncontrolled use of economic boycotting, although initially directed solely against Jews, “in time become a general menace, undermining social, economical and thus German national cohesion.” (*Bestrebungen, die mit einer gegen die Juden gerichteten Tendenz beginnen, letzters zu einer allgemeinen Gefahr für die gesellschaftlichen, wirtschaftlichen und damit auch nationalen Zusammenhänge führen.*)⁷⁰

Gaining civil and economic freedom provided Jews the right to the protection of the state, as granted to every other citizen. “Should it ever be the case,” noted the German-Jewish historian Raphael Straus that “the state divests itself of this protection, the Jews will be completely lost.” (*dass ihnen der Staat seinen Schutz entzieht, so werden sie völlig verloren sein.*)⁷¹ For German Jews, at least, the association between

⁶⁵ Avraham Barkai, “Wehr dich!”: *der Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (C.V.) 1893-1938*, Munich 2002.

⁶⁶ “Die Judenfrage ist keine Religions, keine Rassenfrage, sondern eine Frage der wirtschaftlichen Konkurrenz,” in: Alphonse Levy, ‘Die Erziehung zur produktiven Arbeit,’ *Im deutschen Reich*, no. 2 (1895), p. 59.

⁶⁷ For the *Centralverein* position see for example Eugen Fuchs, ‘Die Bestrebungen und Ziele der Centralverein,’ *Im deutschen Reich*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1895), pp. 145-161; Ludwig Holländer, *Die sozialen Voraussetzungen der antisemitischen Bewegung in Deutschland Vortrag gehalten im Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, Berlin 1910.

⁶⁸ Penslar, *Shylock’s Children*, p. 150. In a historiographical framework the most outspoken representative of this view in the postwar period was the American Jewish historian Ellis Rivkin. In a radical new interpretation of modern Jewish history, he went so far as to argue that “capitalism and capitalism alone emancipated the Jews.” Ellis Rivkin, *The Shaping of Jewish History: A Radical New Interpretation*, New York 1971, p. 159.

⁶⁹ Donald L. Niewyk, ‘Jews and the Courts in Weimar Germany,’ *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1975), pp. 99-113; Sibylle Morgenthaler, ‘The Pre-1933 Nazi Boycott against the Jews,’ *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* (1991), pp. 127-149; Hannah Ahlheim, ‘Deutsche, kauft nicht bei Juden!’ *Antisemitismus und politischer Boykott in Deutschland 1924 bis 1935*, Göttingen 2011; idem, ‘Establishing Antisemitic Stereotypes: Social and Economic Segregation of Jews by means of Political Boycott in Germany,’ *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, vol. 55 (2010), pp. 149-173; Gideon Reweni, ‘The Good, the Bad and the Marketplace: Buycott, Boycott and Jewish Consumers in pre-1933 Germany,’ forthcoming.

⁷⁰ Eine “Große Anfrage” und eine deutliche Antwort. Reichsminister und Landesministerium gegen Boykott,’ *CV Zeitung* 19 Jan. 1933, p. 17.

⁷¹ Raphael Straus, *Die Juden in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Munich 1964, p. 120.

free enterprise and citizenship was finally shattered with the rise of National Socialism, since it became apparent that the marketplace was not inherently a cultivating force promoting rights and tolerance but could just as easily turn into a locus of exclusion and persecution.

CONSUMPTION AND EMANCIPATION—A POSTSCRIPT

While the discourse on Jewish economic position was immersed in a strong sense of ambivalence toward modernity, it seems that many Jews simply voted with their feet by drifting towards those places purported to be modern and prosperous. Between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the start of the First World War, over three million Jews left Europe for New Worlds.⁷² The overwhelming majority of them headed for the United States. Underpinning this immigration was the perception of America as a utopian place of emancipation and material opulence. Although the reality of life in the United States could not always match the utopian fantasies of the *goldene Medinah* (the 'land of Gold'), both in its political and economic connotations, Jews, perhaps more than any other group, embraced the American Dream. There isn't much need to here explain the significance of consumerism for a society whose members originated in disparate places and who had a wide range of cultural backgrounds. As Andrew Heinze has postulated in his book *Adopting to Abundance*, being American meant having things, and Jews embraced this culture of Americanization through consumption.⁷³ Heinze and other scholars of American-Jewish consumer culture have depicted in great detail how the brave new material world in America transformed Jewish life.⁷⁴ This approach seems to imply that Jews first encountered modern consumer culture as newcomers in the New World. It seems to me, however, that it would be difficult to appreciate the alluring power of United State as the *goldene Medinah* without acknowledging that Jews were already exposed to the spirit of modern consumerism in their countries of origin.

Thus what made consumption such an attractive and efficient mechanism of integration in the American context is not just fantasies of comfort and affluence. The American consumer culture offered white European immigrants - Jews included - an opportunity for realizing and enacting the desire for full emancipation without complete assimilation. Under very different social and political circumstances, however, the marketplace had appeared to operate in a similar manner in Europe as well. Early on, Jews like Moses Mendelssohn had recognized consumption as a powerful instrument for consolidating both national

⁷² For an overview see Hasia Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America*, Oxford 2003.

⁷³ Andrew R. Heinze, *Adopting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity*, New York 1990; Diner, *A New Promised Land*, pp. 69-93.

⁷⁴ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America*, New York 1994; *ibid.*, and Susan L. Braunstein (eds.), *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American-Jewish Home, 1880-1950*, New York 1990; Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*, New York 2000; Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*, Cambridge, Mass., 2000.

and social cohesion, as well as nurturing a culture of heterogeneity, popularity and fracture, turning the language of free enterprise and consumer choice into the hallmark of the claim for Jewish rights.

Returning to the observation of Bourdieu with which this discussion began, it seems to me that by endorsing an understanding of the modern free marketplace as a signifier of a new order in which social agents could admit to themselves, and in public, that they had interests,⁷⁵ relevant Jewish discourse suggested a strong correlation between the Bill of Rights and the right to goods. The struggle for emancipation was thus part of an effort to constitute a new phase in Jewish history not only characterized by acceptance and participation but also by different attempts to re-define Jewishness and uphold a distinct sense of Jewish belonging.

⁷⁵ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, pp. 105-106.