

Francesca Trivellato, *The Promise and Peril of Credit: What a Forgotten Legend about Jews and Finance Tells Us about the Making of European Commercial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 424.

by *Oliver Schulz*

Ideas according to which Jews dispose of a sort of hidden knowledge providing them with exclusive advantages in economic life have for long been a widespread phenomenon in economic thinking and continue to be an important aspect of current economic anti-Semitism.¹ The stereotype of “Jewish bankers” running the world in the pursuit of their own interests and using their economic and financial power to control every aspect of politics and society tends to show up regularly in times of crisis and expresses deeply rooted fears about capitalism and its often complex functioning. Not surprisingly, the Jewish origins of leading figures in world finance are regularly brought up in conspiracy theories and help reduce the complexity of capitalist economy and the modern world by pointing at individuals to blame according to these theories. In this context, even the Rothschild reference stemming from the nineteenth century is still used—and apparently understood by the public—as French comedian Dieudonné’s repeated remarks on the Rothschild bank and its dominance of French politics clearly show.²

In this context, research on anti-Semitism tends to stress the longevity and the continuity of stereotypes—not just in the field of economic anti-Semitism—as well as the fact how anti-Semitic stereotypes tend to evolve over time and are regularly updated. One prominent example for this phenomenon is the early modern stereotype of the “Jewish usurer” which would blend into the stereotype

¹ The idea of a “special relationship” between Jews and money and finance has been the topic of recent exhibitions by the Jewish Museums in Frankfurt and in London. See Fritz Backhaus, ed., *Juden. Geld. Eine Vorstellung: eine Ausstellung des Jüdischen Museums Frankfurt am Main, 25. April bis 6. Oktober 2013* (Frankfurt am Main [et al.]: Campus, 2013); Joanne Rosenthal and Marc Volovici, eds., *Jews, Money, Myth* (London: Birkbeck 2019). Due to the coronavirus pandemic and the containment measures in 2020, it has unfortunately not been possible to consult the catalogue of the London exhibition.

² On the “Rothschild” stereotype see Fritz Backhaus, “Die Rothschilds und das Geld: Bilder und Legenden,” in *Shylock? Zinsverbot und Geldverleih in jüdischer und christlicher Tradition*, eds. Johannes Heil and Bernd Wacker (München: Fink, 1997), 147-170.

of the “Jewish capitalist” in the nineteenth and twentieth century.³ The study by Francesca Trivellato to be discussed in this review essay takes an early modern legend on Jews and their economic practices as a starting point, discusses the spread and the reception of the legend by authors in different countries and puts the phenomenon into a broader perspective.

The author, who published *The Familiarity of Strangers. The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven CT [et al.]: Yale University Press, 2012), has a wide expertise in economic history and in the history of anti-Jewish stereotypes in economy and economic thinking, thus shows, for instance, how commentators of this legend were themselves rooted in a long tradition of various representations of Jews and their participation in economic life (e.g. Karl Marx, Max Weber and Werner Sombart who relied on representations of Jews stemming from the late-medieval period).⁴ After the introduction, the book proceeds in eight chapters and closes with conclusive remarks with the title “Coda.” After the coda, there are three very useful appendices with information on early modern European commercial literature, the earliest formulation of the legend and, finally, an overview of Etienne Cleirac’s works, one of the main authors analyzed in detail by Francesca Trivellato in her book.

The first chapter is an introduction into the topic of marine insurance and bills of exchange and uses Etienne Cleirac’s claim made in *Us et coutumes de la mer* published in 1647 that Jews had invented both financial instruments as a starting

³ See my preliminary remarks on the emergence of the “Jewish capitalist” stereotype in nineteenth-century France: Oliver Schulz, “Der ‘jüdische Kapitalist’. Anmerkungen zu Ursprung und Entwicklung eines antisemitischen Stereotyps im Frankreich der 1840er-Jahre,” in *Antisemitismus im 19. Jahrhundert aus internationaler Perspektive/Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitism in International Perspective* (Schriften aus der Max Weber-Stiftung), eds. Mareike König and Oliver Schulz, vol. 1, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 41-58. On “usury” see Jerry Z. Muller, “The Long Shadow of Usury. Capitalism and the Jews in Modern European Thought,” in *Capitalism and the Jews*, ed. Jerry Z. Muller (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 15-71.

⁴ See as well Francesca Trivellato, “La naissance d’une légende: Juifs et finance dans l’imaginaire bordelais du XVII^e siècle,” *Archives Juives* 47, no. 2 (2014): 47-76. Accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-archives-juives1-2014-2-page-47.htm>.

point for his presentation and discussion of this topic. The author points out the conflict between the necessity of these instruments for long-distance trade in a more and more impersonal market, on the one hand, and the intense debates it triggered in which bills of exchange were assimilated to usury at times. In chapter two, Trivellato studies the making of the legend about Jews and their role in inventing bills of exchange. An important aspect to be found in Cleirac's account deals with the fact that, in his interpretation of the topic, Jews had invented these bills in order to keep their property when they were expelled. In this chapter, intertextual references such as the link with Giovanni Villani's chronicle used by Cleirac to reinforce his claim on the origins of the bills of exchange show the transnational dimension of the phenomenon and the circulation of ideas in early modern Europe. Chapter three then deals with usury, regularly evoked in the debates about bills of exchange. It is very interesting to note how an early-modern writer such as Cleirac criticized non-Jewish moneylenders who followed allegedly Jewish economic practices, that is, usury. The following chapter four is an in-depth study of the setting in which Cleirac wrote his book, that is, Bordeaux and its Jewish community in the seventeenth century. In this context, there was the particularity of Jews in Bordeaux who did not openly practice their religion ("crypto-Judaism"), which brings up the issue of the "invisible Jew," dear to later generations of anti-Semites. The following chapter then deals with the "canonization" of the legend and addresses Jacques Savary's *Le parfait négociant*, published in 1675. Savary, recognized as author of merchant literature, worked on Cleirac's presentation of the legend and made its spread more efficient, thus contributing to the affirmation of the legend on the Jewish origins of the bills of exchange. In dealing with Jews and Armenians, Savary also used Orientalist discourse to describe their role in Mediterranean trade. Chapter six discusses the role of Montesquieu in the spread of the legend in Europe, an author well-known in other contexts and important for the development of political thinking, as well as further developments up to the debate on Jewish emancipation in the age of the French Revolution. Chapter seven with the title "Distant Echoes" presents the reception of Cleirac's legend in England, the Holy Roman Empire, Italy and the United Provinces before chapter eight addresses its reception in the nineteenth century by analyzing authors such as Marx, Weber and Sombart.

The study is very well written and is based on an extensive and impressive bibliography in several languages. The author uses the relevant literature in the field and even addresses topics outside her main focus, such as Armenian trade and the Middle East in the early modern period on the basis of extensive current and relevant research literature. In the following, I would like to discuss a few aspects which seem to be particularly interesting and promising for further study of the issue of credit, its link with economic activities of Jews and, finally, with ideas on “moral economy,” not just in the early modern period.⁵

The study is based on two early modern documents on trade found by the author: Etienne Cleirac’s *Us et coutumes* published in Bordeaux in 1647 and Jacques Savary’s *Le parfait négociant*, a manual for merchants published in 1675. The fact that these are manuals which describe good economic practice imply that concepts of “moral economy” are inherent in both documents. Furthermore, the author also points out that such publications on commerce and credit covered a far larger topic in the seventeenth century than just commerce because they could not be separated from moral, political and social ideas (p. XIII). As the study of such a large topic would be endless, she decided to turn to the legend that Jews had invented maritime insurance and bills exchange, a legend which was actively circulating for about 250 years. The legend is without any real foundation and the real history of these financial instruments is well-known, but, due to this, it is even more interesting because it is a good example which shows that ideas matter and can become a social and political reality with their own dynamic, even if they could not be farther away from truth (pp. XIII-XIV). And this is even more rewarding in this case because the example studied here proves the longevity and continuity of stereotypes, a fact often asserted in research but rarely analyzed in depth and over longer time periods (p. 17).⁶

⁵ On the concept of “moral economy,” see Edward P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th century,” *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76-136; James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1976); John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550-1850* (Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

⁶ For instance, the author evokes the “fusion of the figure of the medieval Jewish pawnbroker with that of the all-powerful early-modern Jewish merchant” and shows the longevity and permanent adaptation of well-established stereotypes.

Apart from the research interest the topic represents in itself a case-study for early-modern economic history and the research on anti-Semitism as a case-study in this period, and there are several aspects of particular interest for researchers who specialize in nineteenth-century anti-Semitism which I would like to comment upon here. The fact that “Jewish invisibility” played a role already in early modern Bordeaux where this invisibility went hand in hand with forced conversions and acculturation of the Jewish population, giving rise to fears of “crypto-Judaism,” announces debates that would take place in the context of Jewish emancipation in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. In the context of Jewish emancipation, the “invisible Jew” was also a main problem for many non-Jews. However, the fear of the “invisible Jew” also reflects the highly irrational character of certain debates, because, on the one hand, Jews were encouraged to give up their religious and cultural traditions and not to be recognizable as “Jews” anymore, but, on the other hand, when this was achieved, acculturation and assimilation were highly criticized because Jews could no longer be identified easily, which would nourish fears and rumors of a “Jewish” society within society. This would give rise to all sorts of conspiracy beliefs, such as Jews forming an exclusive and secret community which acted against the interests of Christians, and not just in the field of economy. The question of conversion from Judaism to Christianity, be it forced in the early modern period or more voluntary in the nineteenth century in order to have access to public service and to allow social ascension, for instance, would play an important role in the creation of the stereotype of the “invisible Jew,” an important topic in anti-Semitic discourse in the nineteenth and twentieth century (p. 5.).

Another aspect already debated in early modern Europe concerned the opposition of commodity trade based on ethics, that is, “moral economy,” on the one hand, and profits from speculation, on the other hand, being an expression of “economic parasitism.” Not only does “parasitism” allow for the racialization of anti-Semitism, which would actually occur in the nineteenth century, but this idea also reflects the alleged “unproductive” character of financial transactions, “speculation” in general and any employment in the world of finance. Thus, the early modern debate on moral standards in economic life would continue into the

nineteenth century when “speculation” was juxtaposed to “productive” labor and “morality,” in agriculture in particular.⁷

Another interesting aspect concerns the topic of usury and the role of the Catholic Church in the debate and the creation and spread of this stereotype. Usury, which has been one of the most powerful anti-Jewish stereotypes, was largely practiced by non-Jewish bankers and moneylenders as well, contrary to what the stereotype claimed. Moreover, Jewish usurers and, later on, bankers being part of “high finance,” were a minority compared to their non-Jewish colleagues, but nevertheless, “usury” became an anti-Jewish stereotype, the same as the bankers representing nineteenth-century capitalism, when Jewish bankers were targeted and not their Christian counterparts.⁸ This meant several things: on the one hand, the term “Jewish” was dissociated from Jews and referred to anything which was considered to be bad economic practice (such as “usury” or capitalism and some of its features in the nineteenth century considered to be particularly negative) (pp. 54-55 and 57).⁹ On the other hand, this reinforced anti-Semitic discourse because economic practices considered to be bad were essentialized as “Jewish” which strengthened existing stereotypes and would also allow for the racialization of the topic. Francesca Trivellato rightly points out that paintings from the early modern Spanish Low Countries show Christian moneylenders with “Jewish”

⁷ Derek Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2001), 39; Schulz, “Der ‘jüdische Kapitalist’”, 46. On “speculation” as opposed to “work” in nineteenth-century French Utopian Socialist thinking see Jean-Philippe Schreiber, “Les Juifs, rois de l’époque d’Alphonse Toussenel, et ses avatars. La spéculation vue comme anti-travail au XIXe siècle,” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 79, no. 2 (2001): 533-546.

⁸ On nineteenth-century developments and the real place and number of Jewish bankers in finance at that time, see Michel Winock, “Le temps de l’intégration,” in *La France et les Juifs de 1789 à nos jours*, ed. Michel Winock (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 29-49; 30-31. On “usury” in anti-Semitic discourse in Alsace and its unilateral focus on Jews, Michael Burns, “Emancipation and Reaction: The Rural Exodus of Alsatian Jews, 1791-1848,” in *Living With Antisemitism: Modern Jewish responses*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz (Hanover-London: University Press of New England, 1987), 19-41; 25. On anti-Jewish violence in Alsace in 1848, Daniel Gerson, “Die Ausschreitungen gegen die Juden im Elsass 1848,” *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts* 87 (1990): 29-44.

⁹ On the characterization of nineteenth-century capitalism as “Jewish” see David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York-London: Norton, 2013), 430-439.

physical attributes, which foreshadows a development that would be seen again in later periods (p. 65).

Another interesting aspect brought up by authors such as Cleirac and Savary and spread throughout Europe via translations, among others, concerns what was perceived as the Jewish domination of Mediterranean trade. In this context, other groups such as Greeks and Armenians and their role in trade in general and in Mediterranean trade in particular are mentioned. Trivellato stresses the fact that Jacques Savary underlined the dominant position of Jews in Mediterranean and colonial trade and tended to overrate the importance of Greeks and Armenians, which could be explained by religious bias, the two latter groups being Christians but not Roman Catholics (p. 102). Armenians and Greeks are interesting examples for the study of forms of structural economic anti-Semitism, e.g. in Mediterranean trade or in trade relations with the Ottoman Empire. In fact, some stereotypes the majority population associated with both groups reflect attitudes similar to those shown with regard to Jews, that is, an alleged overrepresentation in trade and in economy in general. In nineteenth-century Balkan nationalisms this would blend with anti-liberal and anti-modern discourse on the dichotomy between the city, on the one hand, inhabited and dominated by minorities such as Greeks, Armenians and Jews, and the countryside, on the other hand, inhabited by the Christian Orthodox majority population engaged in agriculture and rural economies. This dichotomy reflects the antagonism to be found in Western Europe between urban and rural spaces as well as considerations on “moral economy” as opposed to capitalist economic practices. In this context, another interesting aspect would be the study of the relations between these three communities and their place in trade and economy in different late imperial contexts (Russia, Ottoman Empire, Habsburg Empire) (pp. 108 and 110-111).¹⁰

¹⁰ See the remarks made in 1890 by Konstantin Jireček, the first Secretary of Education in the Bulgarian Principality, according to which Jews would have difficulties in competing with “cunning” Vlach, Armenian or Greek village traders or innkeepers. Stefan Troebst, “Antisemitismus im ‘Land ohne Antisemitismus’: Staat, Titularnation und jüdische Minderheit in Bulgarien 1878-1993,” in *Juden und Antisemitismus im östlichen Europa*, eds. Mariana Hausleitner and Monika Katz (Berlin: Harassowitz, 1995), 109-125; 111. On anti-Greek violence in Bulgaria in the early twentieth century, not exclusively motivated by economic motives, see *Ibid.*, 113. On structural similarities between anti-Jewish and anti-Armenian sentiment in late nineteenth-

Trivellato also points out further negative connotations of Jews in the early modern period, not just in economic terms, such as the idea of a rootless people without any sort of patriotism, which already echoes the later anti-Semitic stereotype of “cosmopolitanism” and fits well with economic considerations such as Jews inventing financial instruments only they know and master to hide their wealth and spirit out of the country out of fear of confiscation (p. 149).

Another aspect brought up by the author in the early modern context and worth studying in later periods concerns differentiation within the Jewish community itself, between Sephardic Jews, on the hand, and mainly Ashkenazi, on the other hand, who seemed to correspond more to anti-Jewish stereotypes, not only in economic terms. This would be an interesting topic for a case-study of port cities with well-established Sephardic communities, such as Amsterdam, London or Hamburg, and their reactions to the arrival of Ashkenazi Jews as well as the attitudes of the non-Jewish society towards these different Jewish communities (p. 6).

The nineteenth century is not studied in detail by the author, but this is not a criticism at all because the focus of the study lies elsewhere, and the author herself stresses the fact that the analysis of the reception and the spread of the legend in the nineteenth century would require a study of its own. But with what has already been said in this review article, Francesca Trivellato indicates various very interesting topics and approaches to early modern history which could be easily applied to a study of the nineteenth century as well. One important point she addresses again is the question of the “morality of commercial credit” which reflects the debates, in particular on “moral economy,” studied in the chapters before (p. 162).

century Bulgarian press articles and, for instance, references to Armenians as “parasites” see Veselina Kulenska, “The Antisemitic Press in Bulgaria at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish Issues* 3 (2012), <http://www.quest-cdejournal.it/focus.php?id=296>. Accessed August 20, 2020. This interesting topic would merit further study.

Such a study of the nineteenth century and the long-term continuity of the legend on the bills of exchange could cover several aspects and angles already present in recent research. One important question to be dealt with would concern the attitude of nineteenth-century left-wing political movements which, particularly in the early phases of existence, were far from being free of anti-Semitism. On the contrary, even though anti-Semitism on the Left remained rather a minority phenomenon, it is true that certain schools of socialist thinking such as the French Utopian Socialists largely contributed to anti-Semitism as it would develop particularly in the later nineteenth century.¹¹ Important aspects within this topic are the overlapping of left and right-wing anti-Semitism and their mutual reception, as well as, more generally speaking, the reception and circulation of anti-Semitic ideas between Western and Eastern Europe, such as between pre-Marxist socialists from Russia (the *Narodniki* in particular) and Western Europe.¹²

Finally, in methodological terms, the valuable study by Francesca Trivellato, who transcends national and linguistic boundaries and thus fulfills a claim often made in research literature but rarely put into practice due to various problems, which shows how a study of “international” anti-Semitism can be done by focusing on one particular example such as a legend on Jewish economic activity and its subsequent spread throughout Europe. Thanks to modern technologies and the ongoing digitization of library holdings, this has become much easier, because text software allows for easy recognition of terms and keywords within the documents and makes such a topic less boundless than it used to be even just a couple of years ago.

Oliver Schulz, Université Clermont Auvergne, Clermont-Ferrand

¹¹ See Schulz, “Der ‘jüdische Kapitalist’.” On left-wing anti-Semitism see, among others, Michel Dreyfus, *L’antisémitisme à gauche. Histoire d’un paradoxe, de 1830 à nos jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011); Catherine Fhima, “La gauche et les Juifs,” in *Histoire des gauches en France. Vol. 1: L’héritage du XIXe siècle*, eds. Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), 379-403; Michele Battini, *Socialism of Fools: Capitalism and Modern anti-Semitism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹² Schulz, “Der ‘jüdische Kapitalist’,” 56-58. On the Narodniki and the pogroms in the 1880s see Claudio Sergio Ingerflom, “Idéologie révolutionnaire et mentalité antisémite. Les socialistes russes face aux pogroms de 1881-1883,” *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 37 (1982): 434-453; 439, https://www.persee.fr/doc/ahess_0395-2649_1982_num_37_3_282856. Accessed August 14, 2020

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