

Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492*. (Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. xvii-323. (Heb. Transl. Haim Rubin, Tel Aviv, 2012; It. Transl. Università Bocconi Editore, Milano, 2013)

by *Sergio Della Pergola*

The question of whether economic history should be written by a historian who knows about economics, or by an economist who knows about history remains open and probably will never be adjudicated. In sweeping generalization, economic historians mostly rely on perusing large bodies of archival sources including commercial transactions, legal acts, court decisions, dowries, prices of selected real estates and consumables, and are quite attentive to the specific and mutable political and social circumstances of each time and place. Economists, on their part, tend to develop theoretical models of quite universal applicability and to verify their inference with the help of large masses of quantifiable data somewhat less dependent on time and place uniqueness. The historian often would proceed through cumulative evidence, seldom venturing to generalization out of the given context; the economist more often would try to formulate broader generalization, validating it through empirical materials and statistical inference. In this sense, economists and other social scientists sometimes propend to outline the broader configuration of major processes that instead historians describe in detail from closer direct observation and of whose exceptions they also better know the details.

Ideally, either specialist should be well acquainted with the other's approach and aware of their complementarity, even if the question remains open of whom is readier to look at the forest around the individual trees and more willing to tackle the *longue durée*. Both types of scholarship are needed and probably the respective experts should join forces especially when the topic is complex and extends over wide geographical spaces and time spans, and it would be fortunate if such collaboration happened more often. Disciplinary misunderstandings might be reduced regarding general conceptualization and division of labor on questions of minor detail as well of deeper substance, expressly when both historian and economist seek to penetrate the depths of human mind to uncover the more recondite motives of individual and collective behavior.

This mutuality of approaches, sources and tools is certainly well represented in the collaborative effort of Maristella Botticini of the Università Bocconi in Milano, and Zvi Eckstein of Tel Aviv University and the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, two scholars (B&E in the following) who have tested their skills both at developing some broader timeless and borderless conceptual

frameworks and at getting their hands dirty with the minutiae of miles of documentary shelves and piles of statistical tabulations. The central question B&E ask can be phrased in otherwise familiar words: Why is the economy of the Jews so different from all other economies? As corollary questions projected to present time, B&E ask why are there so few Jewish farmers? Why the Jews did become an urban population of traders, entrepreneurs, bankers, financiers, lawyers, physicians and scholars? Why did the Jewish population shrink from several millions during the first century to what possibly was a historical low point toward the end of the fifteenth century? Hence, in their words, when, how and why did the Jews become the “chosen few?” To provide their answers to these queries, B&E lead us through a brave wide ranging ride across fourteen centuries of history, beginning with the fall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem under Roman occupation, and extending throughout the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.

When broadly reviewing the Jewish experience, there are two types of adversaries: those who attribute Jews every possible kind of abject conspiracy, and those who deny the originality or even existence of a Jewish collective experience. Putting aside the disturbing first type, B&E strive to fight the second type by strongly developing the view that social processes cannot be solely explained by means of instrumental and neutral economic relations but demonstrably rest on a platform of particular values and behaviors that carry symbolic contents. Conventional economic theory often is quite indifferent to these peculiarities or merely confines them to the residual input of “tastes.” Economic history of the Jews, then, must be anything but mechanistic or deterministic as it unfolds in certain rather than other directions as a result of an array of norms and values significantly, or at least partly different from those of other population groups. Starting from the observation of a shared normative core, no matter how modulated by variable local circumstances, the result must be a certain parallelism of the economic histories of Jews in different countries, even under very different physical environments and political regimes. To understand the meaning of these broader trends, they must be appreciated in comparative global perspective.

One of the fascinating puzzles of Jewish economic history is that indeed there seems to be an amazing amount of parallelism in the economic lives of Jews under many and distant different skies. But there also is a huge hiatus between the rural societies described in early textual and other documentary sources, and the crafty, mobile, predominantly small and quite dispersed, often urban or semi-urban Jewish communities of later periods – let alone the heavily metropolitan contemporary Jewish concentrations. A rupture should have occurred at some point in this uninterrupted historical sequence, generating the growth and spread of literacy among the initially rural Jewish population, enhancing the comparative advantage in urban skilled occupations, and supporting the long-term persistence of a Jewish diaspora in search of

worldwide economic and occupational opportunities. Several explanations of this factual sequence have been offered in past literature in the general context of a dwindling Jewish population, namely mass expulsion from the pristine land of Israel with the consequent relatively late landing in other countries. Their late joining of extant consolidated societies could determine the Jews to be prevented from owning land, to be excluded from membership in craft and merchant guilds, to be exposed to periodical persecutions, expulsions and forced migrations mostly on religious grounds. A consequence could be incentivizing investment in human capital which in the past, likewise today, was highly portable and not subject to the risk of expropriation like land and other types of physical capital.

When dealing with these long ranging issues the question of Jewish demographic and socioeconomic continuity and change should be – and perhaps in Jewish cultural discourse not always has sufficiently been – perceived within the framing boundaries of a changing geography, making a keen effort to keep distance from an excessively Eurocentric vision of the Jews. The Jews deep into a time when regarding Europe (but not elsewhere) it makes sense to speak of the Middle Age were a largely Middle Eastern population, and therefore it is in that particular regional context that the great cultural and socioeconomic transformations could occur. The great transition of the Jews to a significantly literate people indeed occurred before or around the mid of the first millennium. This is the central tenet of B&E, around which they articulate much of their understanding of subsequent economic developments. The achievement or rather resilience of comparatively large scale literacy epitomizes the socioeconomic transition of Jews from antiquity toward modernity.

In B&A's view, the key factor in understanding both Jewish population decline and the transition to a non-rural and potentially mobile community is massive conversions resulting from the high costs of literacy education. They submit a parsimonious typology arising from the combination of two factors, personal wealth and the willingness to invest in education, and reach the conclusion that the second is a far better predictor of the resilience of a chain of subsequent generations of Jewish descendants in late antiquity. This major choice occurred in the context of a dramatic political crisis and collapse of the political sovereign component of Jewish corporate existence. This also was the era of the emerging as a major spiritual and political force of the half-brethren, then cousin, then rival Christian sects and denominations, and anticipated the emergence of the new great hegemonic force of Islam. As a general background, it should be remembered that this was an era of great population decline around the Mediterranean and in the Near East with the accumulation of political crises and instability, the fall of Rome, civil and economic decline, wars, epidemics and famine.

Keeping this in mind when we move to the next stage of history, massive urbanization of assumedly literate Jews in a context that still was mostly non-European epitomized the advantages and disadvantages of remaining Jewish in front of the incentives and constraints operating in the domains of trade opportunities, taxation rules, and religious norms. B&E maintain that only an extreme tax differential that overturned merchants' attachment to Judaism would lead Jews to convert, thus confirming the primacy of ideational commitment over mere economic calculus. On the other hand powerful incentives for Jews to persist and thrive in their relatively new economic specializations in trade and money lending also derived from characteristics acquired through a long tradition of cumulated knowledge and shared social norms, such as universal contract-enforcement institutions provided by Jewish law, and social and economic networks with other Jews. This was the more so as Jews possibly in the wake of Islamic expansion were rapidly extending their presence westward, penetrating into growing portions of medieval Western Europe. In other words, restrictions and persecutions that attempted to strangle or block altogether the Jewish presence in Europe were not the cause of the Jews' economic specializations but rather among their consequences.

The next important facet, perhaps not sufficiently present in the conscience of many a reader, is the dramatic rupture brought about by the 13th century Mongol conquests, which destroyed the cities of the Middle East, devastated its commerce, and dramatically reduced demand for urban occupations throughout the region. B&E explain that in the wake of this devastation, diminished opportunities to participate in urban crafts and trade led much of the Jewish population to convert to Islam. In other words, quite reversing a conventional mode of thought, under conditions of extreme crisis Judaism was shown to become the dependent variable of economic process and not its explanatory factor. A Jewish community to thrive needed a functioning and developed (in relative historical terms) urban and commercial society, and it was bound to crisis and decline, to the extreme consequence of disappearance when trade and the urban economy collapsed. If this hypothesis is true in the past, it is certainly worth validating under conditions of modernization and after.

A special excursus on Jewish moneylending, quite at the end of B&E's time span, helps at understanding the mutuality of relationships in the money market. Contrary to a simplified, univocal perception of the banking mechanisms, lenders and borrowers conspicuously overlapped – at least in the example illustrated through Italian archival materials. This intricate web provides important insights on the primacy of moneylending as an occupation, on the primary goal of restrictions – namely to prevent Jews from excessive real estate purchases, on the non-monopoly of Jews in the business, on their relations with the local governments, and on the relative advantages deriving from their extended networking and arbitrage experience and opportunities. It

is unavoidable to observe how vulnerable and how manipulated Jewish moneylenders could be when facing the public interests but also the private greed of local rulers.

Throughout their exploration work, and in order to build the factual pillars of their theoretical construct, B&E proceed cautiously using a vast range of different sources. From the archives of the Florentine Catasto just demonstrated to the Cairo Geniza, from Talmudic decisions and other responsa to a vast array of secondary literature. This said, there are a number of puzzling issues that B&E might wish to consider as they proceed further with their ambitious trip throughout Jewish economic history. Going back to the different approaches of historians and economists – in a sense the contrast between micro and macro paradigms – the reader finds a certain lack of attention to socioeconomic diversity within the Jewish collective. The analytic index – mainly devoted to places and notable individuals – nonetheless might have included items such as *charity*, *poverty*, or *stratification*, not to mention *social class*. It is not that these aspects of the Jewish economy across history are neglected altogether, but their importance vanishes in front of the main thread focusing on the admittedly leading role of educational attainment, or rather investment, as the main driver of Jews economic peculiarity versus other populations, and later on the supposedly dominant role of traders and especially moneylenders in the Jewish economy. In economic reality the role of distributive inequality was actually more than marginal if one thinks of the ample space it holds in the foundational rabbinical debates of *Gemarah*, and much later in the dense institutional web of medieval and early modern communities that had to confront pressing empirical circumstances. Much of the documented legal contentious probably involved middle and lower strata of Jewish society, but this seems to be out of B&E's main analytical focus.

In turn, Jewish attention to the poorer strata of population and the declared effort to alleviate their miserable conditions has been posited by some historical demographers as one of several explanatory mechanisms of comparatively lower Jewish mortality levels due to natural causes, as long as those can be documented. For sure, throughout history Jews massively suffered of additional, exogenous causes of death which either generated massive population declines, or stopped or considerably slowed down their natural increase until the early beginnings of enlightenment and emancipation. But it remains a fact that other things being equal and when the general conditions allowed that, Jewish population steadily anticipated the modern demographic transition and population surge. This clearly occurred after the later time limits set by B&E, but its sociocultural and economic logical premises neatly fit within their time framework.

Concern with population size is indeed central to B&E's main economic argument and in this respect it is intriguing they could not access the works of

several major Jewish demographers like Liebmann Hersch, Arthur Ruppin, Jacob Lestschinsky, and Roberto Bachi, all of whom had developed their own reviews of historical sources (namely Bachi's repertoire of population estimates for the Land of Israel) and theories about the possible size of global and regional Jewish populations before modernization. These omissions do not actually detract from the basic soundness of the long term population scenario presented here, namely the large fluctuations between a substantially large Jewish population in antiquity, sharp decline toward the early Middle Age, relative immobility through repeated episodes of instability throughout early modernity, and a much later demographic take-off.

Regarding the chronology of the great leap of ancient Jewry toward becoming the ancestors of the "chosen few" one would perhaps give more space to possible exceptions. For example, reading studies like Harry Leon's and others on Jews in ancient Rome, one does perceive that the profile of the old rural society does not fit the Imperial capital where – before and shortly after the fall of the Temple – Jews already showed up as a vociferous urban populace settled with their homes, synagogues and skills in peculiar neighborhoods of the big capital city. As noted, this was no more than a small minority within the broader Jewish demographic picture of the time. But theory development should not neglect the exceptions, giving them a role within the more general concept.

Another area that still seems to have significant potentiality for further thought is explanatory discourse. At one extreme, to call into cause Marxist interpretations of Jewish economic history, through Abraham Leon and others, might have been an oddity, but in reality one would have loved to see B&E confronting themselves with materialist historical explanations, were it for the sake of dismissing them. In other words, the call to a reading of economic history that substantively relies on cultural norms which evidently emerges from B&E's work would have become even more intellectually provocative once explicitly set against the opposite claim.

A more challenging confrontation might have been with a more significant reading of Simon Kuznets, the economy Nobel Prize, who is repeatedly mentioned but not really used in the book. Kuznets actually developed much of his theory about the economic structure of minorities in the light of the trends of Eastern European Jews and their great migration to the United States. However much of his broader "constraints" typology seems applicable to other historical situations as well, namely his insistence on the role of seniority among migrant populations as a factor of economic marginality or centrality, on the transmission of historically acquired skills as a relative advantage vis-à-vis other population groups, on the mechanisms of group solidarity, cohesion and proximity, on the mostly perverse but sometimes surprisingly friendly consequences of legal and other discriminations, and also

on the randomness of some developments within the whole gamut of economic mechanisms. Economic theory applied to the study of minorities thus arises from a combination of external and internal determinants, political, psycho-social, demographic, and genuinely economic. It generates unique patterns of population, geographic, and socioeconomic stratification which apply to Jews and to any other sub-populations, and do not seem to be confined within the modern period. Demonstrably more than one of these mechanisms operated over the wide period covered by B&E, leading toward an inherently multivariate explanation, along with investment in education as a possible primary causal factor. B&E stand light years removed from preconceived determinists like Werner Sombart, but they would gauge benefit from a somewhat more disenchanted assessment of the global Jewish environment during the fourteen centuries of their survey.

One of the challenges and perhaps advantages of economic theory is that, as noted, it may succeed at formalizing complex and fluid processes within one synthetic equation. For those among the readers who have followed the mathematical logic behind the formula, the expectation would become that the equation be actually tested with various data sets pertaining to different periods and geographical areas. In other words the strength of reducing complex reality to its essential rational bones should be proven and its ability to encompass human behavioral variance demonstrated. Instead the skillfully constructed models are left without empirical validation and thus they risk becoming more of an ornament to the text for some of the readers, which may be frustrating to some other readers.

But, all in all, B&E make for indispensable and enlightening reading for all those who are interested in a wide ranging reappraisal of the Jewish experience from both the historical and social scientific perspectives. One of their non-trivial merits is that they may serve as an antidote against others who have endeavored to deny the continuity and coherence of an unfolding Jewish history. Proposers of the putative modern invention of the Jewish people must tackle the evidence well-argued here of an uninterrupted chain of events and developments – indeed throughout different continents and under changing external circumstances and many complexities and contradictions. Nonetheless the inherent logical continuity of the developments at stake is persuasively outlined, not unlike some recent studies of population genetics (or historical archeology) have done from their own peculiar experimental perspective.

This study by B&E for sure will continue to stimulate new debates, which for a book is no minor achievement. In some cases the authors' thoughts on the past has been influenced more than they might be willing to concede by the circumstances of later periods not covered in the text up to the present. But their search for a large scale common thread, beyond specific transactions, family networks, local circumstances, or even gossip, importantly contributes

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to elucidating and providing greater depth to a broad understanding of Jewish history, economy, and *mentalités*.

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