

**JEWISH IMMIGRANTS AND AMERICAN CAPITALISM, 1880–1920**

Eli Lederhendler's *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920: From Caste to Class* re-examines the immigration of Russian Jews to the United States around the turn of the twentieth century, a group that accounted for 10 to 15 percent of immigrants to the United States between 1899 and 1920, challenging and revising common assumptions concerning the ease of their initial adaptation and image as a “model” immigrant minority. Lederhendler demonstrates that the characteristics for which Jewish immigrants are commonly known – their industriousness, “middle-class” domestic habits, and political sympathy for the working class – were, in fact, developed in response to their new situation in the United States. This experience realigned Jewish social values and restored a sense of status, honor, and a novel kind of social belonging to these immigrants, along with the “social capital” needed to establish a community quite different from the ones they knew in their homeland.

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# Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920

*From Caste to Class*

ELI LEDERHENDLER



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*Lisa,*  
*this one's for you.*



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## Prologue: Posing the Americanization Riddle – Ethnicity or Class?

There were, in their old communities, on the one hand, the Luftmentshn ... seeking their occasional chunk of bread out of the stray chances of “smoke, wind and onion skin”; and, on the other hand, those who worked no end to make a meager yet sustaining living out of their earnings ... Of such was the family tree of the mass of sweated tailors, bakers, seamstresses, peddlers and contractors, paperhangers ... storekeepers, home-grown intellectuals ... Hard-working, miserably exploited, badly scared people in a land they did not quite understand.

– J. B. S. Hardman, *Jews in the American Labor Movement* (1952)<sup>1</sup>

In this book I assigned myself the task of re-examining the east European Jewish migration to America from the last decades of the nineteenth to the early years of the twentieth century. That migratory stream caused the Jewish population of the United States to swell from its modest size of some 250,000 ca. 1880, to more than 5 million after the Second World War. From the early stages of the migration itself – when it was already chronicled and debated – to the most recent recapitulations, this is a topic that has elicited much interest. Pioneered by such mid-twentieth-century historians and social scientists as Rudolf Glanz, Jacob Lestchinsky, Elias Tcherikower, Oscar Handlin, and Moses Rischin; by economists Arcadius Kahan and Simon Kuznets; and memorably enshrined in the world of letters by Irving Howe, for more than fifty years the re-examination of the east European Jewish migration to America developed into a relatively well-endowed field.

Over time, the Jewish immigrant experience has been increasingly reinterpreted in the light of the trajectory of later generations. In particular, an interest in studying ethnicity – that is, the study of America’s heterogeneous social composition – has heralded a shift from assessing the immigrants’ lives and welfare as they endeavored to cease being immigrants, to a fascination

with their descendants' continued group presence in contemporary America. In turn, this has entailed studying the perception and construction of Jewish cultural difference – meaning how Jews saw themselves and how others have seen them.

By the end of the twentieth century this cultural-ethnicist perspective held sway in American Jewish studies and in effect marginalized certain aspects of immigrant history, such as labor history. By placing inter-group relations in America at the heart of historians' concerns, ethnicity studies have promoted a new scholarly agenda about "identities" jostling for space and attention. Having asserted a determinative role for identity labels in American society, however, ethnicity scholars have since discovered that ethnicity is a concept that will not yield to any finely tuned definition.<sup>2</sup>

In introducing my study, therefore, I will briefly outline what the realignment of issues (from "immigration" to "ethnic" history) implies; I will ask whether the ethnicity model is fully applicable to American Jewish immigrant history; and I will suggest why a return to immigrant history per se might be a fruitful avenue to pursue.

Although immigrants in general, and members of minority religious, racial, and cultural descent groups in particular, elicited some academic attention from the turn of the century and through the 1920s,<sup>3</sup> a new wave of interest in ethnicity began in earnest in the racially fraught decade of the 1960s, famously heralded by the publication of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's study of ethnic and racial groups in New York City, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963). The renewed scholarly interest took its cue from the urban scene, where religion, class, and race were intertwined with ethnic relations. By the next decade, the swelling of new immigration into the United States, mainly from Asian, Caribbean, and Latin American countries, ensured a continued lively discourse on the subject.

In the newer, more critical intellectual climate, immigrant groups were rediscovered as having constituted a volatile, "other" or alternative America. Standing at the junction between their foreign status and their sought-for reintegration as citizens, they appeared to exemplify a liminal moment in American life in which change – rather than stasis – was an inherent aspect of social existence. These "others" served the rewritten history of the American past as both victims and heroes<sup>4</sup> – victims, because their lot was typically difficult, insofar as their ways (appearance, language, manner) were not normative and, hence, were never truly "obliged" by the larger society; victims, too, because they sought ways to accommodate the dictates of the majority, thus allowing the majority to set the rules of accommodation itself; and, finally, heroes, because the historians of race and ethnicity

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elevated the stories of their lives from the mundane and nitty-gritty grind of daily life to something like a portent for America itself. They became an emblem for those who valorize difference, change, and struggle over the pieties enshrined as native, consensual virtues during the Cold War. Indeed, they were the basis of a politicized counter-narrative in which the consensual, regnant national self-image could be exposed as a hegemonic deception.<sup>5</sup> The immigrant bulked large in this morality play as someone who appeared willing – even eager – to be taken in by the national cult, but in the end was not deceived, and whose progeny (grouped under their respective, hyphenated ethnic labels) were better positioned to champion and savor their distinctiveness.

The theme of ethnic identity as having prevailed across generational transitions, integration, and mobility has shifted the balance of discourse about the immigrant experience. Whereas once it was considered *de rigueur* to see the majority–minority dynamic as being ultimately dominated and conditioned by the interests and behavior of the majority,<sup>6</sup> it has since become an article of faith to discover and to valorize self-empowerment and modes of persistence and resistance among the ranks of minority groups themselves. “Much research on immigrant adaptation,” as a recent study summarized the matter, “has demonstrated that immigrants were far from passive victims of zealous reformers and has shifted the focus to the resilience of ethnic communities.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is not farfetched to say that this orientation has become the new orthodoxy. Nor are the ethnic historians alone in adopting the “diversity” gambit as a challenge to the older, hegemonic, liberal-consensus historiography as well as to neo-Marxist concepts of social conflict. As one skeptical critic of contemporary American political studies has observed, “The watchword [in recent studies] ... is neither consensus nor conflict but difference, diversity, and something ‘other,’ [which] had gone unrecognized,” granting “rival cultures” a foundational role in American life and sidestepping the question of what has been powerful and mainstream.<sup>8</sup> Others have critiqued the shift from a larger concern about inequalities in the social structure to a focus on identity politics as a “neo-liberal discourse of rights and assimilation” or “a politics of bourgeois individualism.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, “ethnicity” was easily put to work in service to other related causes, notable among them was the self-referencing of European immigrant descendants as major players in the creation of “mainstream” American culture. This, too, played a public role in the internecine American racial and cultural wars that characterized the identity-politics of the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> If ever a historiographical trend can fairly be termed ideologically engaged scholarship, surely it is true of the ethnic studies field.



Academic interest in Jewish immigrant and ethnic history advanced as more and more scholars with an interest in Jewish studies acquired a stable presence at American universities and greatly enhanced the integration of the field within major university faculties. There they encountered and also helped to formulate a critical analysis of regnant American social mores. In turn, this critique pivoted around the sense of national crisis that beset American domestic affairs at the time, and it has not appreciably abated since. The ideological freight attached to ethnicity studies has by no means been absent from the Jewish ethnic field, whose practitioners have, by and large (though not always), viewed their task as not just explaining but celebrating the persistence and evolution of Jewish folkways, religious institutions, community organizations, political dissent, and subjective Jewish self-identification.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that so many contemporary scholars of the American Jewish experience have evinced a preference for the ethnic rubric, above all of the other classifications used by American social historians to subdivide the national population – class, race, religion, and gender – raises certain issues that merit further exploration.

First, it reflects the historical suppression of the term “Jewish race,” a contested but fairly common usage right into the 1930s and 1940s, and its supersession by the more acceptable “ethnic” usage.<sup>12</sup> Second, the preference for “ethnicity” is related to a post-religious evaluation of American Jewish identity, in which “Jewishness” (a quasi-distinct term, beyond the theological-sounding “Judaism”) is taken to be more inclusive, embracing the secularized as well as the religious experiences of Jews.<sup>13</sup> Third, in a direct link with the second point, Jewish academic protagonists of Jewish ethnic self-definitions tend, themselves, to lean toward secular forms of group identification.

Fourth, as “just” another American ethnicity, Jews stand out far less than they do as a religious community. Until the most recent decades, most non-Christian religious groups were felt to be negligible in their impact upon American society; nonetheless, although Jews never comprised more than 3 percent of the U.S. population, Judaism was highly conspicuous as a non-Christian religious creed.<sup>14</sup> When placed alongside other “foreign stock” populations, however, Jews could be accounted for in comparatively normative terms – still a small minority, but not quite as egregiously different, because their difference was of the same order as the difference of others. Moreover, Jews constituted a larger fraction of the foreign-born population at any given time than they did within the overall national population. Jewish immigrants comprised about 11 percent of total American immigration between 1899 and 1914; they were 14 percent of all immigrants of that era who remained permanently in the United States (i.e., net immigration); and they were one-quarter

of the immigrants from southern, central, and eastern Europe.<sup>15</sup> The American Jewish historian Paula Hyman put it most succinctly: “Jews were not marginal to American history; as one of America’s most successful immigrant groups, they were integral to the making of America.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, it bears noting that the Jews who were present in America before 1881 have rarely if ever been studied under the “ethnicity” rubric. Rather, most historians have written of their experience in terms of their religion, social class, or “community.” The distinction is not just semantic: The application of the ethnicity paradigm to Jews in America closely follows the career of the east European Jews who arrived mainly after 1881. “Ethnicity” as a Jewish scholarly frame of reference, therefore, may be seen as an artifact of the east European wave and its subsequent American-born cohorts.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the implied comparability between Jews and other immigrant groups is problematic. The case for Jewish-American ethnicity (in the same category as Irish-American ethnicity, Italian-American, and so on) is weakened by the fact that it is the country of origin that defines all other American ethnicities (lately, even continent of origin, as in the usage, “Asian-Americans”), and such groups typically comprise more than one religious denomination. Jews, in contrast, possess quite different characteristics, because their “country of origin” is a transnational, religio-cultural diaspora, abounding with more than the usual assortment of language/dialect groups but professing only one religion. When the United States Bureau of the Census introduced a question related to “ancestry” in 1980, it explicitly barred the naming of religious groups – including “Jewish” – as a legitimate answer to that question; thus, Jews are not, officially speaking, defined as an American ethnicity.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, official non-recognition of American Jews as an ethnicity is an established tradition. One of the earliest surveys of the status of ethnic groups in U.S. society, published in 1933, omitted the Jews entirely, “for the reason that separate statistics of this group are not available and for the further reason that the group is not homogeneous, including a number who are descended from many generations of native parents and others who are aliens of several nationalities.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, at the same time, Jews did not as a rule fit culturally, linguistically, historically, or socially with non-Jewish immigrants from their countries of origin (such as ethnic Slavs from Poland and Russia).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there have always been discernible differences between Jewish sub-ethnicities, based on linguistic, liturgical or sectarian, and social-class differences separating Jewish groups hailing from distinct and far-flung cultural orbits. To give one small example: Ethnicity expert Stanley Lieberson sought to compare minority groups’ political integration by checking their respective

levels of political representation (Senators, Congressmen, Cabinet secretaries) and came up against an awkward problem when weighing the case of the Jews in the early twentieth century. His analysis was clouded because in his broader socioeconomic comparisons he was dealing with Jews as part of the “new,” post-1880, southern-central-eastern European immigration wave. Yet many of the politicians of Jewish background in early twentieth-century America were of German-Jewish descent, they or their parents had arrived in the United States long before 1880, and they were typically more wealthy and socially established in American society than the great majority of Jews in America at that time, who were recently arrived from eastern Europe. The political performance of Jews as an ethnic aggregate, comparable to Italians and Poles, could therefore not be directly measured or fully included (or excluded, for that matter). The ethnic category per se defied applicability to “the Jews,” and Lieberman mooted the possibility of comparing Jews, as a religious group, with Roman Catholics.<sup>20</sup>

In view of the fact that the ethnicity rubric presents fundamental definitional obstacles, it may be indicative that some of the most recent work on the self-identity and group-identity discourse about Jews and Jewishness in the United States has pushed the notion beyond the more traditional immigrant-to-ethnic scheme, particularly in the fields of literary and cultural studies. Focusing more on the American-born and -bred Jewish generations, these studies now bring into play such current academic preoccupations as cultural hybridity, diaspora, race (“whiteness”), and “boundary crossings.”<sup>21</sup>

Within the historical field per se, the notion of Jewish ethnicity has also been updated to take notice of the self-constructed aspects of ethnic identification. Ethnicity is now often described as a fluid, open-ended, self-sustaining, even self-invented characteristic, based on individual choice among an array of transformed collective institutions as well as on “memory,” rather than on archetypal, if vestigial, group attributes. Indeed, the recent literature on Jewish-American ethnicity is increasingly fascinated by and engaged with the constructed identities of the post-immigrant second and third generations, for whom secondary social characteristics and the intersecting perceptions of the self-in-the-other/the-other-in-the-self become the real grounds for group identification. This inevitably entails relativizing, and thus equalizing, all ethnic markers and subjectivities. Despite this, one would be hard-pressed to find the expanded terminology being applied in other than self-celebratory ways among Jewish ethnic historians. Rare, indeed, is the kind of self-aware and self-critical perspective demonstrated by the Mexican-American writer Richard Rodriguez, who has remarked that contemporary, middle-class ethnicity is an effect of displacement, “a denial

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of loss.” As he put it, “We think we can reclaim some stature due us insofar as we style ourselves as outsiders.”<sup>22</sup>

The epistemic problem caused by “inventing” and “constructing” one’s own ethnic terms of distinction is that, unless such self-construction is somehow relevant to indigenous points of reference, it is clearly going to be constructed on secondary, perhaps “extrinsic,” characteristics, most of which are shared with others in one fashion or another. This issue lies at the heart of Werner Sollors’s remarks on “The Invention of Ethnicity,” where he restates Frederik Barth’s substantive distinction between ethnicity and culture and queries: “Is not the opposition between ‘pluralism’ and ‘assimilation’ a false one? Does not any ‘ethnic’ system rely on an opposition to something ‘non-ethnic,’ and is not this very antithesis more important than the *interchangeable content* [my emphasis] of flags, anthems, and the applicable vernacular? [...] It is not any a priori *difference* that makes ethnicity.”<sup>23</sup> Or is it, one wonders? Can one posit a strangeness that is not based on a quality of difference?

The move away from ethnic essentialism and toward a redefinition of ethnicity as a self-chosen and self-constructed realm of personality emanates from current demographic realities in American society, among other things. Many Americans of ethnic descent can trace their family ancestry to more than one and often as many as three or more country-of-origin ancestral groups, or else have no clear sense of their ethnic ancestry.<sup>24</sup> Nearly 40 percent of Americans responded to the 1979 U.S. Current Population Survey, when asked about their ancestry, with a mixed-heritage self-definition; and the fifth most common “ancestry” given in the 1980 census, following “English,” “German,” “Irish,” and “Black,” was “American” – an answer that scholars Lieberman and Waters termed “an essentially new ethnic response ... [reflecting] experience since the immigration of their ancestors to the United States.”<sup>25</sup> Conflating the response categories of “American,” “United States,” “White/Caucasian,” and those who gave no response, we find that one in every seven Americans (14.5 percent) offered no particular ethnic self-definition. Combining these with Americans of mixed ancestry (38 percent), we thus account for more than half of American society as a whole, and 60 percent of all non-black Americans.<sup>26</sup>

The widespread mixing of descent group categories, as some have observed, implies that the average person needs to “distort” or otherwise “select” some of his or her “roots,” in order to indicate some particular preference, to mix them indiscriminately at a symbolic level, or even to dispense with such definitions altogether.<sup>27</sup> One upshot of this “post-ethnic” discourse on social difference has been the trend to shift discursive ground, moving back to large, quasi-racial divisions (David Hollinger’s racial “pentagon” of red, yellow, black, brown, and white), as bearing greater significance than specific

ethnicities in American society, wherein “diversity” is equated with the social and political co-existence of these quasi-racial categories.<sup>28</sup>

Alternatively, one finds a return to “non-group” universalisms that echo the old “melting pot” variety of Americanism. As author James McBride put it: “In running from her past, Mommy has created her own nation, a rainbow coalition that descends on her house every Christmas and Thanksgiving,” and that ranges “from dark-skinned to light-skinned; from black kinky hair to blond hair and blue eyes.” Indeed, about 3 percent of the American population now define themselves as being of two (or more) races.<sup>29</sup>

This represents a major revision in our understanding of ethnicity and clearly heralds a point at which former, underlying definitions of socio-cultural group identity have been superseded. Ethnicity as originally conceived was a measure of distinction between native-born and foreign-born, or “foreign stock,” people. As aptly put by Grace DeSantis and Richard Benkin, “Ethnics are only ethnics by virtue of being themselves in a foreign culture. ... Ethnics are not ethnics in their own countries. Their ‘normative’ behavior distinguishes them from others in the society to which they immigrate.”<sup>30</sup>

This classification of people as being “other” depended on tracking their perceived differences – aggregates of qualities that expressed themselves in observed behavior such as modes of family life, religious preference and its style of expression, social organization, and language or other modes of communication. Ethnicity, in short, was taken to be a good predictor of social behavior, and ethnicity studies sought to discover the relation of cause and effect: What caused *this* behavior to come to be associated with *that* group in *this* social setting? At the same time, assimilation studies (ethnicity studies turned on their head) sought to discover what might cause a degenerative process in such primary-group behaviors and attachments.<sup>31</sup>

As the discourse of ethnicity is now pushed beyond ethnic religion, language, and other such primary group bonds and affinities, it has gone further afield in search of markers of ethnic distinction, so that in the end, “diversity” as such becomes its own generic attribute, defined in a closed hermeneutic circle – without pondering the substance of particular aspects of difference. To paraphrase (and admittedly to simplify and conflate) the results of current theory: Ethnicity emerges within the residential, employment, education, and social networks created or supported by immigrant groups in the process of their social adjustment. It persists insofar as virtually anything, once attached to group memory, will serve equally well as a group marker. It can be seen as salient insofar as it may reinforce new social hierarchies and elective affinities (in residential, employment, and social networks).<sup>32</sup>

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Yet, by the same token it must also be seen as less than compelling at the level of the individual because it is based on social correlates that are not shared consistently among all the in-group members and are, in any case, not exclusive to any one group. In this way, ethnicity theory ends up chasing its own tail: Instead of “strangeness” engendering patterns that may justly be described as non-normative for the American context, we now have normative (i.e., widely shared) behavior patterns that are deemed to beget, enhance, or preserve difference. Most disturbing, perhaps, as ethnicity no longer inheres in identifiable behaviors but, rather, in an individual’s “identity,” ethnicity returns as it were to a new essentialism. It is no longer a matter of what one does, but of “what” (or “who”) one is.

It is possible that the problem in these attempts to amend the meaning and extent of “ethnicity” lies in a confusion between *kinds* of difference: one being the differentiation of foreign geographic origin, for which many Americans can account because of their family histories; the second being other processes that engender divergence and diversity in a highly developed, native-born, but heterogeneous society. It may be tempting for Americans to see the latter (diversity in mobility, education, income, lifestyle, political preference, and the like) as a function or extension of the former, but it “ain’t necessarily so.”<sup>33</sup>

In any case, the issue presents a dilemma insofar as Jewish historians continue to refer to a Jewish ethnicity. The problem is not that they uphold a (now disfavored) notion of unchanging or essentialist ethnic group attributes; for the most part, this is not the case. Rather, the problem is that they purport to apply the concept to describe and valorize a simple, enduring, hyphenate synthesis – Jewish-American – in a manner that is out of touch with the intermingled and attenuated reality of ethnicity in contemporary American society. Indeed, as ethnicity goes through a deflation phase, both in actuality and in academic discourse, Jews as white ethnics tend to fade into the general classification of “European white” or some other majoritarian category.<sup>34</sup> The project of Jewish ethnic historians stands out against that background as an attempt to wrest back from “whiteness” a distinctiveness that goes beyond religion per se – a search for Jewish “soul.”

That is the underlying sense of studies that lean heavily on the socially amalgamating function of the plethora of secondary features of Jewish “bonding,” such as residential concentration, generational experiences (childhood, youth, military service), and the like, which are said to delineate persistent social boundaries and to form lasting connective relationships and, above all, feelings.<sup>35</sup> (The breach of Jewish ethno-exclusivity does occur, as mentioned earlier, in cultural and literary studies and outside academic discourse proper, as in the case of a number of bi-cultural and bi-racial Jewish autobiographies.<sup>36</sup>)

Such neo-ethnic narratives tend to uphold this sort of determinism (small “d”) to promote the mystification of Jewishness, without interrogating that claim in the light of larger, structurally determining (“big D”) factors in the wider urban or national American social, economic, and political sphere.

In my previous book, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970*, I argued that the urban crisis in postwar America constituted an essential, “large” determining factor that tended to undermine paradigms of ethnicity based primarily on urban neighborhood clustering, generational consensus, and group-inflected civic pride and solidarity. I also suggested, in a one-line aside, that the essential foundations for Jewish-American social identity were laid by the first immigrant generation, whose trans-Atlantic foray to a new life had long-lasting implications. In a sense, this book is an extended discussion of that throwaway line and another attempt to grapple with the question of large determining factors.

Here I seek to relate ethnic issues – this time, the Americanization of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe – to broader issues of social integration as such. The Jews’ status as immigrants *was* their ethnicity (that is, their “foreignness,” the original sense of the term); indeed, their foreign origin is the defining characteristic that marks them off as an object of research. But is it that status that affords a full appreciation of their lives and how they changed? When trying to understand what turned the Jews from an immigrant group into a component part of the American social system, one wonders whether the latter-day ideological quest for signs of group resilience and persistence has not obstructed a more profound perception of the transformations wrought in immigrants’ lives through their encounter with America.

In approaching this complex web of issues, I intend to reopen for discussion the dimension of class in American Jewish history, for it seems to me that it may help to break through the closed hermeneutic circle of ethnicity. Class is a way of reintroducing a kind of difference that is not entirely self-constructed, but neither is it essentialist. It is also a frame of reference that has content. Whereas the “ethnicity” construct involves a self-defining “I” (both individual and collective), ethnicity in itself is a boundary-post or label that remains constant, impervious to alteration. Thus, while some individuals may decline to further label themselves in a particular, “ethnic” way, the label itself remains intact as a reference point for other members of the group as well as outsiders. All social behavior, in that sense, appears to be determined by the ethnic reference point, either positively or negatively, and is most often understood as the product of some type of *preference* (affinity or antipathy) – generalized from the individual to the group level of analysis.



By re-engaging with class, I query the fundamentally cultural notion of “preference” by referring, instead, to the *situational* variable in immigrant lives: not “who” they wanted or chose to be, but “what” the life they led required them to do.<sup>37</sup> Class, in terms of a situational identity, is a grid that enables or requires one to place one’s own work, possessions, desires, behavior, and interests in some relation to others in a given socioeconomic system, both within and beyond the ethnic boundary.

My inquiry will focus on the function of work and class in the immigrants’ decision to migrate, as well as in their post-migration adjustment and subsequent achievement of honor, status, or “social capital.” I define social capital as the ability to successfully assert and deploy one’s personality and self-regard in the context of relationships with others.<sup>38</sup> Social capital is interrelated with class per se and with occupational mobility, insofar as *changing class relations change the perception of social capital*. Such change can prompt the individual to affirm or deny, or alter, the validity of previously existing forms of social capital. Class and social capital are, in turn, inevitably complicated by migration, because migration (especially to a different country and culture) interrupts and interferes with all social relations. I will argue that new forms of social capital, created in America in the immigrant encounter with work and class, undergird and define the change from “foreign” (immigrant) to “American” (ethnic-group) status.<sup>39</sup> I will treat east European Jewish immigrants not simply as a subculture, but rather as people attempting to break out of their social confines, to breach the wall between the inner domain of immigrant life and the domain of social goods to be won “outside” – namely, a place in the established American class hierarchy.

Moving class to the foreground in analyzing the history of Jewish immigrant integration in the United States does not imply a history of the Jewish labor movement in America. Rather, it indicates that the economic transformation of the Jews will be presented as the key to understanding their other adjustments to the American ambience. The economic dimension, as prior research demonstrates, was a central causal factor in Jewish and, generally speaking, all migration; and what America as a society represented to migrating populations was a brand-new economic footing.<sup>40</sup>

My discussion of work, class, social capital (honor), and ethnic culture owes something to the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, who has used seventeenth-century Jewish memoirs and ethical texts from Germany to explore the ramifications of social and cultural theory for an understanding of economic issues in the Jewish realm. Davis opened for renewed discussion the salient topics of money, honor, domesticity, and rationalization of economic behavior.<sup>41</sup> In pursuing these themes into a different milieu and time period,

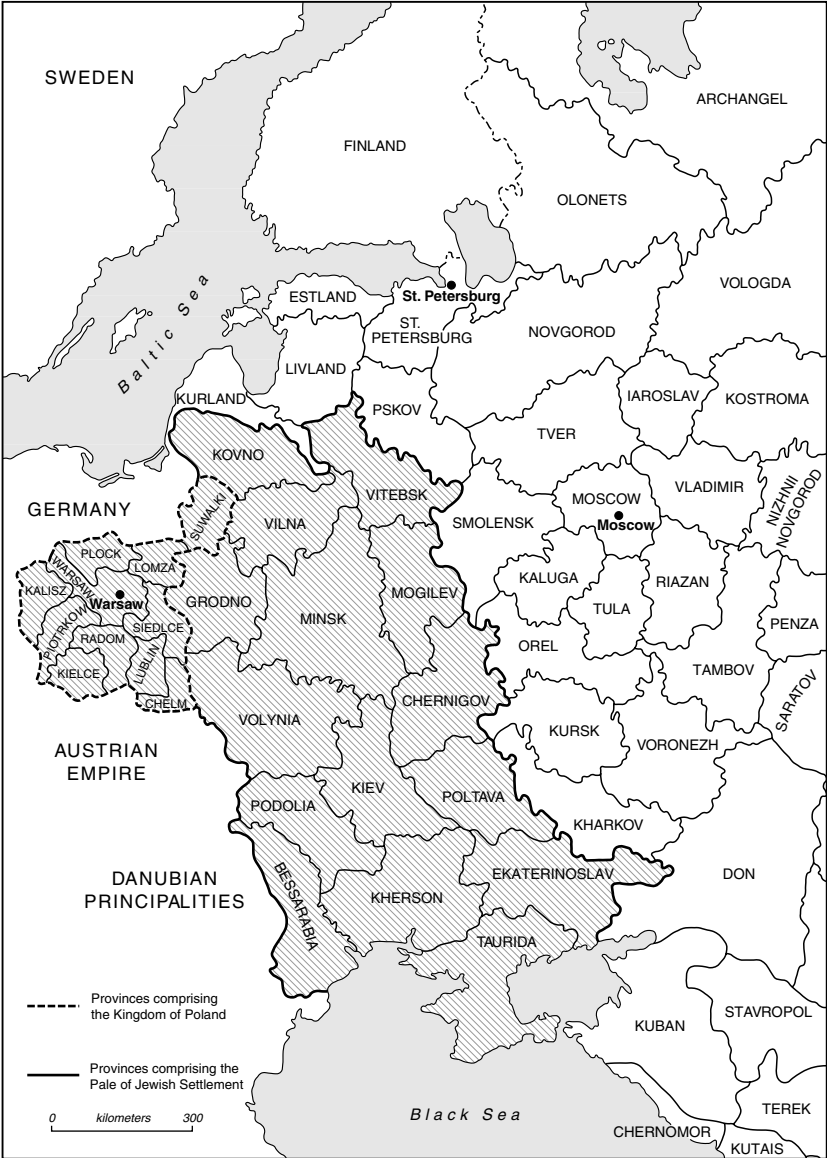


I aim to build further on her insights and to contribute a more general analysis of the social meaning of class and its qualitative shift between the east European and American contexts. Derek Penslar's work on Jewish political-economic thought, philanthropic initiatives, and economic performance and its cultural representation in western Europe has also done much to inspire my foray into the economic dimensions of Jewish social identity.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of Jewish migration and work experience, some important studies have already been done by Nancy L. Green, who examined the working lives of immigrant Jews in France and the United States comparatively, especially with regard to the needle trades.<sup>43</sup> My work is in part a thematic continuation of her discussion of the impact of economic relations on social bonding, though I seek to emphasize economic integration as an overriding dynamic. I take my cue from Werner Mosse's assertion that Jewish economic behavior has historically borne the imprint of Jews' adaptation to social conditions, much more than to their religion or "culture," as understood in essentialist terms.<sup>44</sup>

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The salience of the socioeconomic dimension within the history of mass Jewish migration to America rests not only on the assertion that it was motivated largely by the hope for material betterment, but also on the disproportionate gap between the developed state of the American industrial economy and social system – especially in large cities – and the relatively underdeveloped state of Russia's economy and society at the time. That gap looms especially large in the case of the Jews, an overwhelming majority of whom lived in some of the least industrially advanced zones of European Russia (including much of Poland in that era). In a country with a rudimentary class system, Jews were largely in the process of being deprived even of the relative social advantages they had once enjoyed, vis-à-vis the peasantry. The old feudal economy in which Jews had played a substantial role was in decay long before the 1860s, when serfdom was ended. Although some modernizing inroads were evident in the latter part of the century, the bulk of the areas where Jews were mainly permitted to reside (known as the Pale of Settlement) offered very few such prospects, especially for Jews. Impoverishment became the common lot of 15 to 30 percent of the 5-million-strong Jewish population (with some estimates ranging much higher).<sup>45</sup> As one observer put it, "By the end of the century the bulk of the Jewish merchant population had been reduced to a mass of peddlers, hawkers, petty money-lenders and small shopkeepers. The era of the 'ol' clo's Jew' and the *Luftmensch* was at hand."<sup>46</sup> Along with the swelling ranks of Jewish manual laborers, downwardly mobile



Map 1: Areas reserved for Jewish residence within the Russian empire in 1855.

Source: John Doyle Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question, 1855–1881*, Cambridge University Press, 1995 (p. xxi).

Jewish petty merchants comprised a large pool of potential emigrants and by the 1870s the first signs of an incipient outpouring were evident.

Jewish impoverishment in Russia was not a reduction to a lower-wage, blue-collar job. It meant chronic unemployment or, at best, only occasional work for those in manual trades; a thorough lack of effective vocational training for most young people; a family economy in which all members – young, old, male, and female – were of necessity co-dependent on each others' work capacity or marital market worth in an arranged-marriage system; an underdeveloped manufacturing sector; the status of a "lumpenbourgeoisie" for most peddlers and petty trades people; and widespread dependence on charity. In a word, it meant not just the lack of income, but also the lack of any real standing – that is, class – and thus virtual caste status. Jews and several other minority populations of the Russian empire, as Gregory Freeze has put it, "actually constituted subsocieties rather than [estate-type social] strata."<sup>47</sup> To be very specific: east European Jewry did not lack social cleavages; rather, it was a population subject to economic and national policies, in Russia especially, that resulted in a deficiency of stable class formation and class structure.

By comparison, in America's already stratified society, Jewish immigrant workers and small trades people lived mainly in the nation's largest industrial and commercial cities and worked in trades that were on the rise. Thus, over time, they assumed a stable and recognized economic role and function close to the functional heart of the economic and social system, regardless of how little they earned. With these integrative advantages, they also began to accumulate social capital.

Clearly at stake in this transformation, therefore, is not earning power alone – though that was crucially important. Beyond providing the means for a meager subsistence, basic amenities, and educational opportunities for one's children, work in the New World provided the chance for attaining standing in and beyond the community, without which one was a de-classed person and incapable of influencing one's surroundings. An important sign of what was occurring in the immigrant community in America was that the accumulation of social capital held no relation to the pre-industrial social hierarchy it previously obtained within Jewish communities in eastern Europe: The new distribution of social goods in the form of status made no distinction between former members of prestigious subgroups (such as rabbinical scholars and yeshiva students) and those with the lowliest *yikhes* (lineage, position). The stakes were quite different now.

Those stakes – what they were and how they were perceived – form the major subject of this study. The main thrust of my investigation concerns the capacity to function in the wider social realm (*Gesellschaft*) as a means

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of understanding the intimate inner world of primary and extended family networks or close community (*Gemeinschaft*). It is, indeed, apt that ethnic historians have paid a great deal of attention to domesticity and patterns of consumption as a context for ethnicization.<sup>48</sup> They essentially see ethnicity as a projection of selfhood and intimacy; thus, such current notions as “agency” and “empowerment” are more readily visible in that frame of reference. In distancing my own analysis from avenues already explored by ethnic historians, and therefore focusing on the sphere of production, I offer an alternative way to understand ethnicization: With social capital in the form of a real place in the pecking order came the basic coin of social participation and community building. The “agency” of ethnic change was the urban industrial economy.