



Uwe Spiekermann, Paul Lerner, and Anne C. Schenderlein

Jewish Consumer Cultures in 19th and 20th Century Europe and America

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JEWISH CONSUMER CULTURES IN 19TH- AND 20TH-CENTURY EUROPE AND AMERICA

Conference at the GHI Washington, May 7-9, 2015. Co-sponsored by the Max Kade Institute for Austrian-German-Swiss Studies at the University of Southern California. Conveners: Paul Lerner (University of Southern California), Anne Schenderlein (GHI Washington), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI Washington). Participants: Olivier Baisez (Université Paris 8, Vincennes-Saint-Denis), Michael Berkowitz (University College London), Aleisa Fishman (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington), Andrew Godley (University of Reading), Felix Heinert (Herder-Institut für historische Ostmitteleuropaforschung, Marburg), Anna Holian (Arizona State University), Roger Horowitz (Hagley Museum and Library), Ruth Leiserowitz (GHI Warsaw), Anja Meyerrose (Kalaidos University, Zurich), Jerry Z. Muller (Catholic University of America, Washington), Riv-Ellen Prell (University of Minnesota), Gideon Reuveni (University of Sussex), Nils Roemer (University of Texas at Dallas), Hizky Shoham (Bar-Ilan University), Kerri Steinberg (Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles), Frank Stern (University of Vienna), Kerry Wallach (Gettysburg College), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI Washington).

While the so-called economic turn in Jewish history has opened up new perspectives on both Jewish political, social, and cultural history and modern economic history, consumption and consumer culture remain relatively understudied topics. This is quite surprising because consumption has played a crucial role in the formation of Jewish identities and practices in many historical and geographic contexts, and consumer culture has been a rapidly growing field of historical and social scientific enquiry for some years now. The conference “Jewish Consumer Cultures in 19th and 20th Century Europe and America” focused on this promising and challenging field of research. In their welcome addresses and introduction, the three conveners, Uwe Spiekermann, Anne Schenderlein, and Paul Lerner, helped frame the ensuing discussions and emphasized that Jewish consumer cultures should be analyzed in their entanglements with those of other ethnic and religious groups and the dominant trends in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the questions they posed were: What role has consumption played in the creation of Jewish identities, and how has this varied in different environments and contexts with the emergence of modern consumer societies? What roles, functions, and perceptions of Jewishness and

Jewish actors contributed to the shaping of consumer societies in the Western world? Was there something particular about Jewish consumers, about the commodities and services, which shaped the modern Jewish experience? What are the various methodologies and topics encompassed within the field of consumer culture studies?

The first panel, “Modern Consumer Cultures and Jewish Consuming Practices,” chaired by Jerry Z. Muller, connected well-known stories about retailing, modernity, and Jewish involvement in cinema and the arts in new and promising ways. Frank Stern, in his talk “From Vienna to Königsberg: Innovation and Visual Representation,” wove in his own family history going back to the late nineteenth century, in sketching the representative business culture of the Wien, Jacoby, and Kronheim families in eastern Prussia. Their garment stores and early *Kaufhäuser*, characterized by big showcases and with the family name displayed above the shop front, developed a new style of visibility both for consumer goods and for their Jewish proprietors. These family businesses, de facto ruled by the lady of the house, featured face-to-face business transactions and created trust and mutual respect among the worker and peasant customers. Stern drew astonishing parallels between the selling of fabrics and the selling of dreams in Vienna, where family members were active in the emerging film business, a commercial sphere with a pronounced Jewish presence. “Jews and the Art Market in Photography: Respectability, Modernity, *Wiedergutmachung*” was the topic of Michael Berkowitz’s contribution, which pointed out the striking overrepresentation of Jews in the world of twentieth-century art photography. Berkowitz argued that the skyrocketing prices commanded by such photographers as Richard Avedon, Robert Capa, and Alfred Stieglitz need to be understood in the context of earlier Jewish historical currents. He focused in particular on the contributions of Josef Breitenbach and Helmut Gersheim to establishing and developing a market for Jewish photographers in Europe, the UK, and the US after World War II.

The general topic of the conference was further developed in Gideon Reuveni’s keynote lecture “Does Consumer Culture Matter? The Jewish Question and the Changing Regime of Consumption.” Asking how consumer cultures can help us understand and broaden general and Jewish history, Reuveni pointed out that in lands of immigration, like the United States, they allowed Jews to be Jewish and integrated at the same time. This helped answer the “Jewish question,” the tension between assimilation and preserving identity, in a new way. Consumer

cultures indeed permitted Jews and other groups to preserve their distinctiveness while simultaneously becoming an integral part of mainstream society. Through references to such figures as Israel Zangwill and John Dewey, Reuveni showed how the Jewish and the general consumer market helped to define the Jewishness of modern citizen consumers. Jewish consumers, furthermore, were not passive, but rather produced their own goods and ideas on Jewishness and made this buyable for other groups. Identity became a matter of choice, although this often resulted in the loss of the Jewishness of particular consumer goods, like the bagel. In his concluding remarks, Reuveni turned to the unique situation in Israel. Although Zionists used marketing strategies to forge national solidarities, the contrasts between the goals of reestablishing historical Hebrew culture, developing a modern consumer society, and fulfilling the needs of a militarily mobilized state are striking. Consumption, as an expression of a secure and comfortable life, remains a dream in contemporary Israel.

The second day began with a panel on the theme of “Defining and Crossing the Borderlines of Consumer Cultures.” Moderated by Richard Wetzell, the panel began with Ruth Leiserowitz’s nuanced analysis “From Peddlers to Shopkeepers: How Consumption Came to the Countryside.” Focusing on the border between eastern Prussia and Lithuania, she offered a rich portrait of a world shaped by peddlers and fairs, which she contrasted with the new world of small Jewish-owned shops from the 1860s. These new shops offered a growing range of goods, made possible by the spread of railroads, which allowed for cheaper and more efficient transport. Leiserowitz emphasized the new marketing efforts of retailers, developing — as in the cases Stern mentioned — a new form of Jewish visibility and modern branded goods. The adoption of modern selling techniques, for instance, by the new Salamander franchise shops in eastern Prussia exemplified the commercialization of the countryside after World War I. Uwe Spiekermann, speaking on “Needs and Fashion: Jewish Second-Hand Dealers in Germany, 1871-1938,” acknowledged that such developments represented a dominant trend but tried to use the concept of “the peddler” to analyze a broader range of consumer-related activities. Peddlers linked towns, villages, and the countryside, dealt with a broad range of goods, and combined very different forms of payment, including cash, credit, and barter. They also traded in used goods, a dimension often neglected in the analysis of modern consumer cultures. Spiekermann demonstrated the transition of

peddling into both shop-based and various itinerant trades. The rag and scrap trade was profoundly shaped by Jewish businesspeople, which contributed to enduring associations, stereotypes, and prejudices — outside and even inside the Jewish community. The Nazi regime eventually prohibited Jewish peddling and second-hand dealing in 1938. Anna Holian set a different tone with her presentation on “Setting Up Shop in Postwar Germany: Jewish Shopkeepers and the Spaces of the Unofficial Economy.” Her example was the Munich Möhlstraße, a space with a pronounced Jewish presence in the late 1940s and 1950s. Surrounded by nice bourgeois villas, some Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution invested capital they had earned on the black market to establish an unofficial, shop-based economy, which local police eyed with suspicion. Holian’s innovative use of architectural plans offered insight into a transient trade run by a population that understood its status as temporary. Most of the Jewish traders soon migrated to Israel (or moved to Frankfurt am Main), yet even those who stayed in Munich longer and invested more capital in their stores built relatively temporary structures, reflecting their ambivalent situation in postwar Munich. Finally, Hizky Shoham broadened the panel’s geographic scope with his talk on “‘Sales Agents (of Nationalism) Inside the House:’ Children as Consumers in Interwar Palestine.” The focal point of Shoham’s presentation lay at the intersection of two potentially conflicting bourgeois notions: the idea of protective childhood, wherein children were to be sheltered from the “corrupting” market — a sign of “civilization” for many Jews in the *Yishuv* — and the region’s nascent consumer culture, which used modern marketing techniques to instill a sense of national identity in Jewish children. Using the example of children’s periodicals, Shoham showed how toys and foods were marketed to socialize a new generation in the project of creating a Jewish national homeland.

Jews were central actors in the creation of modern consumer societies in Europe and the US. The third panel, “Producing for an Emerging Consumer Society,” chaired by Uwe Spiekermann, concentrated on the garment and retailing industries as the perhaps most striking examples of such pioneering work. The first presentation, however, already challenged ideas of Jewish exceptionalism. Business historian Andrew Godley, who delivered his lecture from Reading via Skype, examined “Jewish Entrepreneurs and Fashion Production for the Emerging Consumer Culture: The London and New York City garment industries, 1880-1940.” Godley challenged cultural-ethnic perspectives and the common assumption that expertise in tailoring

explains the astonishing success of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the garment industries. Members of this group, Godley argued, were not especially literate, and their skills as tailors were not advantageous in the US and UK because the conditions there were fundamentally different from those in Eastern Europe. Instead, Jews entered the emerging women's fashion industry at a moment of skyrocketing volume and rising profits. As newcomers, Jewish immigrants were willing to accept low wages, and the sweatshops offered small flexible units. Jews were successful, then, above all because they were in the right place at the right time, not because of their Jewishness, Jewish tailoring in Eastern Europe or any ethnic particularities. Nils Roemer then turned to the topic of luxury in presenting "Stanley Marcus: Fashioning a City," which shed light on the emergence of Neiman Marcus in Dallas as a global leader in high-end fashion retailing. This company's rise was closely linked to Dallas becoming the third-largest clothing producer in the U.S. in the 1940s. During the era of McCarthyism, Roemer showed, Stanley Marcus adhered to his values, standing up for civil rights and social justice. At the same time, he turned his flagship Dallas store into a conduit for the arts and European haute couture. Paul Lerner discussed a rather different approach to modern consumerism in his presentation on "Salman Schocken: Zionism and Consumer Modernity in Saxony." Schocken, located predominantly in Saxony, did not create the fantastic dreamworlds associated with the department stores of the Wilhelmine era but offered useful goods at reasonable prices surrounded by Erich Mendelsohn's rational and transparent architecture. Lerner stressed that Schocken established his system as a contrast to the traditional imperial architecture of Wertheim and his attempt to Germanize the department store. Lerner connected Schocken's cultural Zionism with his business approach, framing it as a kind of dissimilation from both German tradition and the German-Jewish bourgeoisie. As these two papers showed, Jewish contributions to modern consumer cultures were, indeed, multiple and varied.

The day ended with a fourth panel on "Images, Perceptions, Dreamworlds: Advertising and Visual Consumer Culture," chaired by Anne Schenderlein. Oliver Baisez started with his case study "Advertising in German Zionist Periodicals around 1900." He used two volumes of the largest German Zionist journal, *Jüdische Rundschau*, and provided a detailed overview of the elaborate advertising sections, comparing the years 1904 and 1913. Most striking was the close integration of the

Zionists into bourgeois society. Religious articles, wares, and services held a prominent position, but fragments of bourgeois life became increasingly important. In contrast to other Jewish journals, Zionist journals also used the ad section for political purposes, and in 1913 Palestine occupied a far more conspicuous position. Switching to the other side of the Atlantic, Kerri Steinberg put “Manischewitz & Maxwell House Coffee: A Story of Jewish Advertising and Marketing” on the agenda. These were both brands developed by Jewish entrepreneurs for the expanding American market. Coffee, previously not consumed during the Passover holiday, became fused with the Seder through the hugely successful Maxwell House Haggadah and its aggressive advertising campaigns. Matzos, first mass-produced by a rolling machine developed by German-American immigrant entrepreneur Isaac Merritt Singer of sewing-machine fame, embodied the synthesis of tradition and modernity, suggesting a kind of synecdoche of the American-Jewish experience, that is, integration through consumption.

The fifth panel, “Race, Gender and Consumption,” chaired by Mark Stoneman, analyzed the daily practices of Jewish consumer cultures and their limits. For Aleisa Fishman, the spread of suburbia created Jewish community and sustained Jewish identity in a broader American setting. “Mrs. Blumenthal Builds Her Dream House: Jewish Women and Consumer Culture in Postwar American Suburbs” presented this as a new life experience that included home ownership. The home was a crucial site for the practice of Jewishness; it often included a kosher kitchen and was linked to a network of kosher meat markets, synagogues with Jewish gift shops, and a number of specialized entertainment opportunities. Having furs as an attribute of Jewishness in general, and of Jewish women in particular, was the topic of Kerry Wallach’s paper “Buy Me a Mink: Jews, Fur, and Conspicuous Consumption.” Based on visual and literary texts, Wallach’s subtle analysis noted the active Jewish involvement in the fur trade and indeed the sexualization of the (female) Jewish body at the turn of the century. Traditionally, fur hats, or shtreimels, were worn by Eastern European rabbis and ultra-orthodox Jews, but during the nineteenth century nonreligious fur consumption rose steadily. In the anti-Semitic imagination, furs became a symbol of the savage nature of the (Jewish) wife, of her attraction and seductive power. At the same time, the use of furs as luxury and fantasy goods fueled internal Jewish criticism of the dangers of luxury in general and furs in particular. Consumption, as these papers show,

at times triggered intense debates not only outside of but also within Jewish communities. Roger Horowitz's presentation "Making Wine Kosher: Manischewitz, African American Consumers, and the Limits of Jewish Assimilation, 1950-2000," opened up other perspectives on the Jewishness of products. Manischewitz wine, another apparently typical Jewish ritual requirement, was a modern New York product, much sweeter than traditional Jewish wine. It became the leading kosher wine after World War II, but this resulted primarily from its consumption by African Americans. Indeed, Manischewitz resembled the sugary, homemade wines of the American South and reminded blacks in the Northeast, who had been uprooted by the Great Migration, of the taste of home. The rabbi on the label and its centrality to Jewish ritual may also have resonated with deeply religious African American consumers. Indeed, Manischewitz developed two distinct marketing strategies for its different core consumers, and the company soon found that its Jewish market was finite, especially when suspicions about its *kashrut* arose in the 1970s and higher-end kosher wines emerged in the 1980s. Riv-Ellen Prell, in her talk "Excess and Jewish Women: Jews, Gender, and the Early Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture in the United States," began with a powerful historiographic intervention against the tendency of the economic turn in Jewish history to eclipse women. Women's labor, Prell showed, lay at the root of modern consumer cultures. Her analysis of the American Yiddish press in the early twentieth century looked at recurrent images of Jewish consumers through the lens of gender and, like Kerry Wallach's paper, showed how anti-Semitic notions informed Jewish perspectives of Jewish consumption and forged stereotypes, in this case of Jewish women as either loud and vulgar or as insatiable consumers addicted to luxury who threatened their husbands' tenuous economic prosperity.

Clashing perspectives of consumption and the meaning of consumer goods can cause significant conflicts, as the final panel "Consumer Cultures in Conflict," chaired by Paul Lerner, convincingly demonstrated. In her presentation "German Jews and the Suit as Object of Inclusion/Exclusion," Anja Meyerrose inquired into the meaning of wearing various kinds of outfits in different settings. The suit, the typical dress of seventeenth-century British merchants, became the dress code for bourgeois men because it disguised their cultural and religious background and could easily be bought. Consequently, Jews adopted the new clothes from the early nineteenth century and used it as a marker of emancipation and integration. In Germany,

by contrast, uniforms remained the most prestigious form of dress, and Jews, who were unable to ascend to the upper echelons of the military or bureaucracy, were consequently excluded from the highest ranks of society. But *shehitah*, *kashrut*, and kosher food practices also demarcated Jewish identities, defining exclusion and inclusion from the Jewish perspective, as Felix Heinert demonstrated in his talk “Imagined Community and Beyond: Riga’s ‘Kosher Revolution’ of 1905.” Heinert presented the tsarist kosher meat tax as an expression of the conflict between the imperial government and local traditions and the struggle between traditional and modern slaughtering methods. New forms of local cooperation between Jews and gentiles emerged to mitigate the pressures from the modern Russian state in the years around the 1905 revolution. Finally, Anne Schenderlein turned the topic of consumption on its head and presented Jews as non-consumers in her paper “The American Jewish Boycott of German Goods.” The Nazi seizure of power and the anti-Jewish boycotts that began on April 1, 1933, were answered by a boycott campaign against German products on the part of many Jewish organizations. The effect was fairly limited because participants feared potential retaliation and many exiles still wished to express their solidarity with Germany. Such problems resulted in the failure of any similar boycotts after the Holocaust and World War II. In this period, individual boycotts as expressions of identity or the desire to memorialize someone or something tended to replace public boycotts that sought direct political consequences.

In brief closing remarks, each of the three organizers pointed out general themes that ran through the three conference days and highlighted areas for further research. Uwe Spiekermann raised the question of Jewish exceptionalism. Its essence and definition remained unclear, he argued, as did the problem of how to compare the Jewish experience with that of other groups. Can Jewishness really be compared as such — or is it necessary to compare more specific circles, such as Jewish immigrants, elites, or marginalized groups? Second, for Spiekermann, many (Jewish) historians still emphasize Jewish contributions to the rise and the establishment of modern consumer cultures. But such connections raise many issues — not only in relation to the notorious link between Jews and capitalism as posited by Werner Sombart. It seems that it is necessary to embed such stories in more general histories. In particular, an analysis of Jewish history through the lens of comparative consumer cultures would open new opportunities for a broader and less isolated Jewish

history. Third, spaces matter. The differences between Europe, the United States, and Israel were striking, even across similar branches and institutions. Regional variation was important, as well as differences between urban and rural settings, in borderlands or on frontiers. Fourth, time and timing need to be examined very carefully. Business history's strong emphasis on detailed chronologies and empirical evidence leads to analyses of the Jewish experience of modern consumer cultures whose terms differ from those of cultural history. Nevertheless, consumer cultures were a crucial component of society already in the nineteenth century, so analysis should not be limited to the twentieth century, or the interwar or postwar periods.

In addition, Spiekermann pointed out auspicious new fields of research. First, goods, or more generally commodities, are a promising topic. The social and commercial life of many "Jewish" products has yet to be written, as has the place of goods in defining Jewishness. Second, looking at the self-perceptions and identities of Jews in modern consumer cultures, which are closely linked to the performance and perception of Jews in these fields, provides insight into the coherence and internal divisions of modern Judaism. Third, the role of business in the Jewish experience allows for a new understanding of the transition of Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While in the beginning mostly associated with money and the rise of the financial sector, peddling offered one path for consumer-goods industries and retailing to become dominant, at least temporarily. But how was this related to the ongoing transition to advanced services, to science and law? Fourth, Jewish consumer cultures included alternatives to capitalism. Zionism and consumer cooperatives (Openheimer, Staudinger) questioned the dominant trends in modern history — and fit well with the strong anti-capitalist sentiments among many Jews in the twentieth century.

The closing discussion brought further topics into view: Paul Lerner noted the utility of anthropological and semiotic approaches to the study of goods and their meanings, the position of Jews as consumers and non-consumers, the gendering of consumption and work in consumer industries, and the differences between the intended and real use of products. He also called attention to the strengths and limits of consumption as a category of historical analysis and noted that the consumption of objects and the consumption of culture require different metrics and conceptual tools. Anne Schenderlein emphasized the coding and double-coding of goods and practices, the visual

dimensions of consumer cultures, and the intertwined relationship between production and consumption. Other participants mentioned the relevance of advertising, the question of specific Jewish ways of consuming, the idea of building trust, and the importance of ethnic and familial networks in the emergence of retail industries. At the end, the participants agreed that the conference had offered many persuasive answers to the question Reuveni posed of why consumer cultures matter in Jewish history.

Uwe Spiekermann (GHI), Paul Lerner (USC), and Anne Schenderlein (GHI)