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Review Essay

The Promise and Peril of Credit: What a Forgotten Legend about Jews and Finance Tells Us about the Making of European Commercial Society. By *Francesca Trivellato*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xvi + 406 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 9780691178592.

Reviewed by Robert Fredona

Representatives of all nations gather for the utility of mankind; there, the Jew, the Mohammedan, and the Christian behave towards each other as if they were of the same religion, and reserve the word “infidel” for those who go bankrupt.

—Voltaire, letter VI, *Lettres Philosophiques* (1734)

Voltaire’s words about the London Royal Exchange, quoted by Francesca Trivellato in her important new book *The Promise and Peril of Credit*, represent *pars pro toto* a view of finance and trade—as peaceful, tolerant, antagonistic to the old segregations and brutalities of religion, and ultimately emancipatory—that entered the philosophical mainstream in the eighteenth century, that seems to at least partly form the foundations of liberal modernity, and that continues to shape the way we think about business and capitalism today (p. 139). Yet Voltaire himself was an anti-Semite who obsessed about the Jews and trafficked in old clichés about cunning Jewish merchants precisely in order to make his case for commerce as a vehicle of toleration. This and similar ironies or contradictions lie at the heart of *Promise and Peril*, which traces from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century what Trivellato calls a “legend,” because it is both patently false (we now know), and was once widespread, that Jews in the Middle Ages or Renaissance invented the bill of exchange (and sometimes also marine insurance).

Before the creation of actuarial models of risk, the “mathematics” of marine insurance relied on experience, intuition, and expertise—on underwriters having special “knowledge of vessels, captains, routes, wars, piracy, and other elements affecting the likelihood of an accident at sea” (p. 22). More problematic still was the most sophisticated credit instrument of early

modernity, the bill of exchange. For Trivellato, bills of exchange—“arcane,” “enigmatic,” “cryptic,” and “intangible” financial instruments—“epitomized the promise and peril of early modern commercial credit” (p. 2). They were highly technical, coded, long-distance credit contracts not found in Roman law, not founded on any collateral or real security (unlike marine insurance), and simultaneously a means both of currency exchange and, since they were transferable and discountable, of exchange rate and credit market speculation. Backing a bill of exchange was nothing more or less than the presumed solvency of the bill’s far-flung signatories. And, as such, behind each bill of exchange “lay a highly personalized, if no longer face-to-face, market in which dense networks of epistolary correspondents marshaled the information necessary to evaluate an endorser’s credibility” (p. 34).

The word “credit” derives from the Latin verb for trusting (*credere*), and knowing whom to trust was a matter of vital concern in the world of early modern European commerce. This world was one of disconnected and dispersed communities, like the Sephardic merchants of Venice and Amsterdam, or those of the Tuscan free port of Livorno, who were the subject of Trivellato’s major 2009 study, *The Familiarity of Strangers*. The segmented nature of these trading and financial communities (associated with ethnic, religious, and civic or national identities) meant that, especially in the increasing absence of close business or personal relationships, without modern information and verification technologies, and, importantly, without modern notions of equality, it was appealing (perhaps even rational) to have recourse to collective stereotypes when assessing, for example, the creditworthiness of potential debtors. Such stereotypes informed not only the ad hoc judgments of merchants, but also the legislative decisions of statesmen and princes, which set different “parameters of public action” for different merchant communities (p. 12). This state of affairs allows Trivellato to collapse the distinction, sometimes starkly drawn by historians and critical theorists, between “representation” and “practice,” between, in this case, the stereotypical image of the Jewish merchant and the way commercial transactions were actually facilitated, if not the structural conditions of preindustrial money and credit markets themselves.

What did it mean, in such a context, Trivellato asks, for Jews to be stereotypically associated both with *perfidia* (faithlessness or untrustworthiness) and with extravagant commercial acumen? To have two such seemingly incompatible reputations? Anti-Semitic tropes were rampant in many early modern Christian genres, from sermons to political broadsides, but the “legend” at the heart of Trivellato’s book somehow thrived, counterintuitively, in a burgeoning

and diverse mercantile literature meant to lionize commerce and, sometimes, to quell unease about its broadening financialization. *Cui bono?* What would the authors of such a literature gain from associating the bill of exchange, the essential (and already anxiety-producing) instrument of that financialization, which formed the foundation of the international credit market, with Jews? It is precisely the deep dissonances within the stereotype about Jewish merchants (at once perfidious and hypercompetent), Trivellato argues, that kept “the legend” alive into the early twentieth century. “Negative group stereotypes,” she further notes, “tend to be remarkably impermeable to reality, even as they possess a striking ability to conjure new meanings out of a finite repertoire”. And this dual feature of the “legend” allowed it, in the hands of mercantile writers, to become “a substitute for hard-to-define normative criteria for the rightful handling of bills of exchange” (p. 13). There was, to put it bluntly, a right way to use and trade in bills of exchange and then there was the Jewish way. “By recourse to the old trope of Jewish deceit,” Trivellato writes, the “legend,” which relied at the same time on a trope of Jewish mercantile acumen, “articulated concerns about the morality of credit that were very real and yet difficult to pin down” (p. 35).

In the middle of the seventeenth century, as France was entering the arena of European maritime expansion in full force, the port city of Bordeaux was growing into a major hub of the Atlantic trade and its economically dynamic Jewish population (perhaps 2 percent of the whole) was growing ever more visible. The descendants of forcibly baptized Portuguese Jews, they were living not openly as Jews but as “New Christians,” tolerated and even protected by local and royal authorities for economic reasons, yet feared by some rival merchants and by Bordeaux’s much larger gentile population. Just as the Roman church suspected these “New Christians” were crypto-Jews, continuing to follow Jewish law in a mockery of the sacrament of baptism, the wider Christian world was gripped by the fear that Jews were becoming indistinguishable from Christians. In Bordeaux, as Trivellato writes, “they walked the same docks as other merchants and sat in the same church pews as other Catholics” (p. 84). In this way, crypto-Judaism in Bordeaux aggravated a long-term “crisis of legibility in the boundaries separating Jews and Christians,” one that had erupted more than a century and a half earlier (p. 95). And to this preoccupation, telling Jews and Christians apart, the increasingly impersonal markets of the sixteenth century in which guilds were losing ground as reputational gatekeepers added yet another, telling good and bad debtors and good and bad credit instruments apart.

It was amid these overlapping contexts that the “legend” first emerged in print, in a publishing success called the *Us et coutumes de la mer* (1647; expanded edition, 1661), a comprehensive collection of maritime laws and norms assembled by Étienne Cleirac (d. 1657), a Catholic and monarchist with a background in Roman law who was dedicated to conferring respectability upon the *filis de Neptune*, those sailors and merchants who made their living or their fortunes from navigation and maritime commerce. Cleirac provided idiosyncratic (sometimes muddled and error laden but often compelling) commentaries alongside the norms he collected, and in them he waged war against financiers, tax farmers, and especially foreigners, who threatened France and her people with “their malicious schemes, swindles, plots, monopolies, cabals, and Jewish ways of dealing (*Iuifveries*)” (p. 93). Cleirac’s account of the “legend” is an “astonishing mix of fact and fiction, a mix that ensured it a long life”: Jews expelled from France in waves between the seventh and fourteenth centuries invented marine insurance and bills of exchange in order to save their financial assets, and Italian exiles of the factional strife between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines availed themselves of the same Jewish techniques and ultimately brought them across the Alps to northern Europe (p. 37). The medieval usurer in his many guises—the Jew, the Lombard, the Cahorsin—transcended, in Cleirac’s account, the divide between the Middle Ages and early modernity and proved both “tenacious and malleable” as a means of understanding and grappling with anxieties about credit and finance (p. 48).

In “abbreviated and sanitized form” the “legend” was incorporated into Jacques Savary’s 1675 *Le Parfait négociant*, “the single most influential merchant manual of early modern Europe,” which guaranteed its diffusion and entry into the canon of commercial literature (pp. 99, 8). A wealthy wholesale merchant-mercator (*mercier-marchand en gros*) from a once noble family, the talented and well-connected Savary was a crucial player in a major transformation of French commercial culture. Trivellato describes as “nothing less than epochal” one of the reforms initiated in the late 1660s by Louis XIV’s famed finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert and drafted by Savary because, by subjecting all persons involved in trade to recently formed merchant tribunals, it changed commercial law in France “from a personal-status law (*ratione personae*) into a subject-matter law (*ratione materiae*)” (p. 86). “Together,” Trivellato writes, with a rare hint of the hyperbolic, “this piece of legislation and *Le Parfait négociant* laid the legal and cultural foundations for a commercial society based on contract rather than rank” (p. 105). Although it is not treated in a sustained way in any one place in her book, this transition, writ large and on a

societal level, is the profoundest subject matter of *Promise and Peril*. And although it is not directly cited, one cannot but call to mind the (forgivably teleological and procrustean) thesis of Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) that, in his famous formulation, the passage "from status to contract" in legal regimes marked the passage from ancient to modern societies.

What is at stake in *Promise and Peril* is not so much those concepts (rank and contract, here not especially well defined or theorized, or their various theoretical-historiographical synonyms like Niklas Luhmann's personal trust and system trust) as the passage between them, its duration, its abruptness. The notion that Jews in the marketplace (and later in civil society) would be treated not as Jews, belonging to a distinct and firmly circumscribed group, but simply as merchants, indeed ultimately as equals, still provoked deep anxieties in the seventeenth century and even, Trivellato shows, in the late eighteenth century. In the absence of necessary regulations, of the sort that Colbert himself (always more distrustful of merchants than Savary) and, later, Colbertists increasingly supported, the "legend" itself acted as a kind of shared and internalized regulatory mechanism: "the figure of the Jew was essential to the definition of market ethics . . . because Jews served as abstract referents that exemplified improper behavior" (p. 120). The "legend," in a way, is thus part of the history of self-regulating commercial society and part of the dark prehistory of the self-regulating market. The creation of commercial society in Europe (indeed, the creation of modernity) cannot be understood, Trivellato shows, without reckoning with these troubling anxieties, and without reincorporating (or incorporating for the first time) the history of the Jews fully into the history of the West. The anti-Semitic trope of the Jews as a people apart, "a people within a people, a nation within a nation," has largely been matched by a history apart, a historiography apart. *Promise and Peril* is a clarion call to no longer relegate the history of the Jews to the margins of the history of France, of Europe, of commerce, of modernity.

The most prominent eighteenth-century voice supporting the view with which this review essay began (a view that, following his phraseology, has come to be called the *doux commerce*, or "sweet" or "gentle commerce," thesis) was that of Montesquieu, who made the case for commerce's pacifying, transformational power in his epoch-making 1748 book *De l'esprit des loix*. A version of this view, according to Trivellato, continues to exert a strong influence in the field of Jewish studies, both popular and academic, where a faith in "commerce as a driving force in the transition from toleration to equality" and in "the Enlightenment trope of commerce as

sociability” remains potent (p. 130). In terms of the history of the Jews in France, she notes, this belief strengthens the Sephardic/Ashkenazic dichotomy, portraying the Sephardim as savvy and socially integrated harbingers of emancipation and the Ashkenazim as isolated remnants of the Old World, in, regardless of its intent, yet another manifestation of the long-lived (and, especially in the twentieth century, deleterious) trope of Ashkenazic pauperism and backwardness. Purveyors of this idea also, Trivellato writes, imply or sometimes even explicitly posit “an invisible link connecting Montesquieu’s celebration of Jewish commercial activity . . . to the extension of citizenship” to Jews in France in 1790–1791. And Trivellato’s elegant and powerful revisionist treatment, in chapter 6 of *Promise and Peril*, of Montesquieu and French emancipation, is undoubtedly the high point of the book, transmuted what is often a difficult and slow rummage through the forgotten attics of the history of commercial ideas into truly essential and vibrant reading for historians in a whole host of fields, including French history, Jewish history, Enlightenment history, and the “new” histories of capitalism and political economy.

Even before the end of the seventeenth century, the “legend” about the Jewish invention of bills of exchange had been refuted (first and on historical grounds by Jacques Dupuis de la Serra, in his 1690 *L’art des lettres de change*, who instead credited exiled Florentine Guelfs, a view that not surprisingly achieved some prominence among campanilistic Florentines and Italians more broadly) and many of the references to the “legend” in the printed commercial literature were, to use Trivellato’s term, “dubious.” (By my count, about 20 percent of the French works and 57 percent of non-French works mentioning the “legend” by 1800 were dubious.) There was in fact, as Trivellato notes, also “an enduring counternarrative” to the “legend,” largely spread by Italian and Spanish writers, in which “merchants’ industriousness, not the prodigious talents of one refugee group or another” had led to the development of the bill of exchange, which ultimately allowed the movement of money and goods to the benefit of humanity. Dupuis de la Serra’s refutation marked a first “moment of discontinuity” in the long life of the “legend”; Montesquieu’s acceptance and reworking of the “legend” marked a second (p. 113). Montesquieu influentially argued that *l’esprit de commerce* triumphed over the barbarism of the Middle Ages around the time of the first European transoceanic voyages and that Jews brought about this triumph:

The Jews invented letters of exchange; commerce, by this method, became capable of eluding violence, and of maintaining every where [*sic*] its ground; the richest merchant having none but invisible effects, which he could convey imperceptibly wherever he

pleased. . . . Thus we owe to the speculations of the schoolmen all the misfortunes which accompanied the destruction of commerce; and to the avarice of princes, the establishment of a practice which puts it in some measure out of their power. . . . From this it became necessary, that princes should govern with more prudence, than they themselves could ever have imagined. . . . Happy it is for men that they are in a situation, in which, though their passions prompt them to be wicked, it is however their interest to be humane and virtuous!” (pp. 276–77 of the translation of Thomas Nugent, London, 1793)

No longer did the “legend” serve to distinguish, as it had in Cleirac and Savary, shady (i.e., Jewish) dealings from righteous business practices. For Montesquieu, the benighted scholastic theologians were the enemies of commerce and the Jews “harbingers of modernity” (p. 134). As a result of the threats and depredations of princes against tangible Jewish property, they invented the bill of exchange, which, being essentially immaterial, allowed them to “elude” such acts of politicized violence; as a result, princes had to learn to govern more prudently, their interests counterbalancing and even overcoming their wicked passions. “For Montesquieu, who glorified commercial credit, bills of exchange became the antithesis to, rather than the sequel of, the pawnshop” (p. 135). And the positive and utterly original—“as novel to eighteenth-century readers as Machiavelli’s nonreligious definition of virtù [must have] appeared to readers of *The Prince* two hundred year earlier” (p. 136)—Montesquieuian spin on the “legend” resulted in the “bifurcation” of its transmission, with Cleirac and Savary signaling in one direction and Montesquieu in another, even though travelers down both roads were convinced of Jewish cunning and viewed Jews more as symbols, or as vehicles to articulate concepts, than as equals in the marketplace or the city square (p. 139).

In his controversial and important book on the Enlightenment roots of modern anti-Semitism, Arthur Hertzberg used Montesquieu as a foil for the anti-Semite Voltaire (*The French Enlightenment and the Jews* [1968]). He “was consistently quoted,” Hertzberg wrote, “by all those who were on the side of the Jews” (quoted on p. 143). Yet Montesquieu’s praise of Jews as the inventors of a financial instrument beneficial to mankind must be tempered, Trivellato argues, by the fact that Montesquieu “assumed that Jews inhabited a society of status that kept them in a subordinate position” (p. 131). And, strikingly, though commercial motives had clearly inspired the early modern regimes of toleration and of privileges for Jewish merchants (as in Cleirac’s

Bordeaux), when emancipation finally emerged as a real possibility in France in the last quarter of the eighteenth century “the virtues of commerce were never used as weapons by pro-Jewish advocates” (p. 157). This can be explained by routine and newly prominent linkages in the discursive tradition of Jews to commerce through the medium of what was then called *friponnerie*, an amorphous mixture of bad faith, conniving, and usury increasingly synonymous with Jewish business practices. When emancipation was a real possibility, and Christians and Jews would no longer be formally separated, usury became “the symbol of something bigger—namely the suspicion that Jews might be unable to partake in civil and political society as fair players” (p. 159). And tantalizing as it is to draw a bright line from Montesquieu’s revolutionary reading of the “legend” to emancipation, the French debates surveyed by Trivellato show that the discursive environment surrounding Jewish emancipation was not one in which Jewish ties to commerce were praised but one in which the line between Sephardic international merchant-bankers and Ashkenazic moneylenders was collapsed and old fears about Jewish invisibility resurfaced. “In fact,” Trivellato concludes, “commerce played a minor role, if any at all, in the political emancipation of the Jews” (p. 155). Historians of eighteenth-century France and of Jewish emancipation will have to grapple with Trivellato’s revisionism and with the blow it deals to notions of “gradual” improvement from toleration to emancipation, but there can be no doubt, as she argues, that Montesquieu scholarship has been shaped by “a deep investment,” on the part of historians, “in the irenic and inclusive quality of *doux commerce*” and that this legend (*doux commerce*) played an important role (as did the stadial theories of economic development proffered by the foremost thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment) in the historical near oblivion of the other legend (the Jewish invention of the bill of exchange) (p. 133).

The final chapter of *Promise and Peril*, in which Trivellato discusses how “the founders of modern social theory” both accepted and rejected the “legend,” is, perhaps unsurprisingly given the fraught modern themes it surveys, the book’s weakest and something of a missed opportunity (p. 213). It also represents the first time that, in Trivellato’s usually steady hands, the focus on the “legend” and on the representation of Jews within Europe’s commercial literature seems to limit rather than expand the scope of previous inquiry. Although it ranges over a capacious territory, justifying to some extent Trivellato’s caveat that she cannot “provide an equally granular description of the historical contexts” involved as she had for earlier chapters, the conceptual heart of the chapter, which occasionally devolves into a coy morality play, circles around a discussion

of Werner Sombart's 1911 *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (p. 200). That text laid out a narrative, as Trivellato describes it, in which "the Jew . . . with his creative genius" was present at every stage in the evolution of credit from a personal to an impersonal matter, including at the invention of the bill of exchange (or, more precisely, the moment when it became endorsable and negotiable in the sixteenth century) (Sombart quoted on p. 206).

Trivellato pulls no punches: Sombart's book is "preposterous," it includes "distorted citations and ludicrous statements," it "pillaged and distorted" then contemporary Jewish scholarship, and so on (pp. 206–7). Trivellato, who lists all of the bibliographic citations in *Die Juden* in an appendix to *Promise and Peril*, seems almost as upset about Sombart's faulty scholarship — it is "far shoddier," even, "than Weber's"!—as she is about the "insidious fantasies," which she says his book fueled. Almost. For Sombart, she writes, "capitalism bred moral decline, which is why it had a Jewish face" (p. 214). Perhaps more than Sombart himself, Trivellato's target appears to be those in the field of Jewish history who have undertaken a "partial rehabilitation" of Sombart's thesis in *Die Juden*. Trivellato is right to call this undertaking "perplexing," and she is certainly right that *Die Juden* should be seen "as a flawed empirical account and as a chapter in modern intellectual history" rather than adopted as an "imperfect model" (pp. 223–24). But, far from "equally granular," the context she provides for Sombart, after largely leapfrogging much of the nineteenth century, is little more than Wilhelm Roscher's 1875 strange essay "Die Stellung der Juden im Mittelalter" and an almost offhand reference to Sombart's "flirtation with fascist ideology" (Arthur Mitzman quoted on p. 223). One parenthetical remark—"regardless of whether or not one agrees that Sombart embraced a racial theory of Jews"—instead of rhetorically waving it away only calls attention to the iceberg of tumultuous debate and interpretation floating beneath the still surface waters of Trivellato's portrait (p. 215). Sombart was seen as an ally by many Zionists—one of his works was even translated by David Ben-Gurion in 1911, as Trivellato notes—and nineteenth-century debates about the exclusionary nation-state (indeed the ethnic nation-state, and the Jewish state) must be a prime locus of any discussion of Sombart and the Jews (p. 379n41). And, we might add, when Sombart, writing for a different audience and at a different time in his revised *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, and looking back to a mercantilist era of more or less inclusive empires (even multiethnic ones), explicitly addressed the Weber thesis *in nuce*, he found the burgeoning "spirit of capitalism" not *pace* Weber

in “any definite religious system or any definite sect” but among those whom Sir William Petty called “the heterodox parties” and Sombart calls “heretics,” the religious and political nonconformists, the migrants, the outsiders, a class that for him is defined in an explicitly relational or positional rather than essentialist way and that included in Europe both Jews and ascetic Protestants (1928, vol. 1, book 2, chap. 60 [“Die Ketzer”], 880–81, my translation).

In chapter 8, Trivellato also describes a “revolt of the medievalists” (beginning parallel to the one identified by Wallace K. Ferguson with that phrase some seven decades ago, in which medievalists like Charles Homer Haskins attacked the modernity of Burckhardt’s Renaissance) against the Weberian view that the economy of the Middle Ages was precapitalist. Economic historians in the inter- and postwar period, beginning with Henri Pirenne in Belgium—“many (but not all) Catholics, and a few flirting with fascism”—pushed the origins of capitalism back to a “commercial revolution” occurring in the thirteenth century or even earlier, in urban Italy and in the precocious trade of the Italian mediterranean (pp. 198–99). (The term “commercial revolution” was coined, in a dialogue with N. S. B. Gras, the first ever professor of business history, by Raymond de Roover, then a recent Harvard MBA, who was, for what it’s worth, a Catholic, a Belgian monarchist, and a fierce anticommunist—though, as Trivellato herself points out, some of these medievalists were also Jews, like Robert S. Lopez, and members of socialist and democratic left parties, like Armando Saponi.) Though the medievalists-in-revolt rejected Weber’s chronology of the origins of capitalism, Trivellato argues, they did not reject his “Christianization of capitalism,” which, in Weber, the sociologist of religions, is a quintessentially Western phenomenon while Judaism is an Eastern faith. Instead, she claims, the medievalists “pushed Jews to the fringes of medieval urban economies by portraying them as pawnbrokers rather than international traders” and they did so, she believes, “as a way of cleansing the stain that any associations of capitalism with Jews carried” (pp. 212, 214). Perhaps, but this a bold (and damning) argument to make on the basis of silences and lacunae, especially when many of the figures Trivellato discusses—Gino Luzzatto (whose papers are at the Università di Venezia Ca’ Foscari), Saponi (at the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati di Siena), Lopez (at Yale University), et al.—have left behind voluminous and revealing correspondence, private papers, and annotated books.

Early on, Trivellato notes that her “interpretive practice is loosely indebted to symptomatic reading,” though without the messy “deconstruction, Marxism, and psychoanalysis” that originally influenced it, namely to a kind of reading that exhorts the critic to “unveil the latent meanings that

lie beneath the surface of a text” (pp. 20, 298–99n3). If the economic historians of Italy who justifiably challenged the Weberian chronology of capitalism’s origins failed to speak of Jewish international merchants or, say, failed to mention Werner Sombart’s *Die Juden* (as in the case of Amintore Fanfani, whose failure to cite it in his *L’opera di Werner Sombart*, written for the centenary of Sombart’s birth, is mentioned portentously on p. 212) in order to “cleanse the stain” of Jewish associations with capitalism, this was apparently happening at a level of latency accessible only to symptomatic readers. *Promise and Peril* is full of “why” questions—for example, “Why did Savary endorse the story of the Jewish origin of bills of exchange?”—questions that admit no direct, clear evidence or for which any such evidence, if it ever existed, is no longer extant; these are questions that Trivellato handles with precision and sophistication by richly contextualizing them (p. 104). The pioneers of the field of Renaissance economic and business history, whose “fertile season of scholarship” was decades long and, in many ways, truly pathbreaking, deserve similarly rich contextualization (p. 213). Their “season” was a time when, as Trivellato notes, “business history was still integral to the study of the Renaissance,” before the American practice of economic history largely “had migrated from history to economics departments,” when scholars were steadfastly interested in an economic revolution marked by “institutional more than technological change,” and before the center of gravity in the field had shifted from preindustrial Italy to industrial England (pp. 218, 219, 21). This world we have lost (founded upon a doubtlessly politicized, wider search for the origins of modernity in the Middle Ages) cannot be recovered, and reverential silence about these pioneers and their flaws (scholarly and otherwise) does nothing other than stifle economic historians in the present, but any meaningful and lasting critique must be rigorous and fully informed. Had Trivellato cast a just slightly wider net, one that captured other important figures in the medievalists’ revolt like Hilmar Krueger, Lopez’s old friend from the University of Wisconsin, who wrote about the medieval Genoese trade in the Mediterranean and North Africa in the interwar period, she would have rapidly found medieval Jews as bankers and wealthy traders rather than as urban pawnbrokers. More to the point, Trivellato’s treatment of both Sombart and the medievalists-in-revolt suggests that, at least here, the focus on the Jewish place in economic literature is not finally capacious enough to make meaningful sense of either. It was Sombart’s (also shoddy *qua* scholarship, but monumental and visionary) *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, especially in its revised second edition, which Luzzatto partially translated into Italian in 1925, and not his “preposterous” little book on

the Jews and economic life, that left a powerful imprint on the medievalists. (A dark irony, alas, is that Luzzatto was increasingly forced to take on translation work from German to Italian—especially of other economic historians and business historians such as Alfred Doren and Richard Ehrenberg [whose approach inspired N. S. B. Gras in defining the American contours of business history in the late 1920s], sometimes anonymously—because, in his life and career, he was painfully suffering under fascist Italy’s anti-Semitic racial laws.) “For a very long time,” Luzzatto would accurately write in the introduction to his translation of Sombart, “no work in the historians’ field, had had the fortune of stirring up around itself such a fervor of critical and polemical writings” (*Il capitalismo moderno* [1925], 6, my translation). A glimpse of this unparalleled fervor and the reasons for it would have gone far in contextualizing Sombart, presenting a more nuanced view of his approach to the origins of capitalism (and his was, indeed, a more nuanced approach than Weber’s), and in understanding the approach of the medieval revolt to the ethnic and religious dimensions of economic history, which, if viewed fairly and fully, is unlikely to be entirely reducible to “Christianizing” in order to exorcise capitalism’s Jewish demons.

Seven appendices (running to nearly seventy pages) and extensive, sometimes fascinating, endnotes together constitute an outsized chunk (about 44 percent) of *Promise and Peril*. The first appendix presents an impressionistic and pugnacious survey of the quality, cost, and availability of bibliographies and databases of early modern European “commercial literature.” Trivellato rightly bemoans the prohibitive expense of proprietary databases like Gale’s *Making of the Modern World*, which contributes to a growing “digital divide” in academia, and she raises the crucial point that premodern commercial literature must be a much more capacious (even promiscuous) category than the term “economic literature” would suggest still today. The next five appendices present a list of Cleirac’s works, English translations of three versions of “the legend” (one from the expanded and widely circulated 1661 second edition of Cleirac’s *Us et coutumes de la mer*, one from Jacques Savary’s 1675 *Parfait négociant*, and one from the 1723 first volume of his son Jacques Savary de Brûlons’s *Dictionnaire universel de commerce*, posthumously completed by the latter’s brother Philemon-Louis Savary), and lists of books in French and other languages that mention “the legend” up to 1800. The final appendix, as mentioned above, lists the works referenced in Sombart’s *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*. Compiling it was surely tedious work, and perhaps, at the risk of employing a Catholic metaphor, a kind of penance. The first appendix, to which I will return below, should (and could easily) have been reworked to be placed

in the text proper and, given Trivellato's old-fashioned approach (actually reading, rather than counting or "data mining" or visualizing), I am unsure of the need for and the value of publishing the rest of the lists and translations. Taken together their (perhaps admirable) "kitchen sink" quality might outweigh their ponderous lack of *sprezzatura*, the Renaissance value of making it look easy, made famous by Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528), but without any list-centered analysis in the book their presence left this reader bewildered, especially given Trivellato's characteristic lightness of touch in the text of the book. Undoubtedly necessary to write the book but certainly not to read it, like Wittgenstein's famous ladder they should have been thrown away *sozusagen* after being climbed.

In framing her book, Trivellato downplays the powerful and exciting revisionism at its core and opts instead to highlight "three broad historiographical debates on which [her] analysis impinges": rethinking the relation of representation to practice, which I have briefly discussed above and in which her book presents a master class; questioning periodization schemes and received continuities and ruptures in the historical narrative; and challenging the canon of "economic" literature (p. 7). She is, I think, only partially successful in this last area and is uncharitable to other scholars who have tried to do the same thing before her. To take one example, only half of the authors of the books in Trivellato's Appendix 6 (non-French books that cite the "legend") can be found in the text (excluding the notes and appendices) of *Promise and Peril*. Taken as a whole, this half is certainly a noncanonical group (few nonspecialists, indeed few specialists, will have ever read, for example, Johann Heinrich Zedler or the brothers Ascanio and Pompeo Baldasseroni). But about half of these authors appear only once and are not subject to any analysis, while many of those who appear more than once are, of course, already more or less canonical (Beccaria, Bielfeld, Forbonnais, Genovesi, James Stuart), and just one certifiably canonical figure (Montesquieu) appears as much as all the rest combined. This cannot be a criticism, for Montesquieu's role in her story is essential and brilliantly handled, but it is a reminder that canons (sometimes for good reasons) are hard to avoid and harder to replace. Similarly, it is easy enough to give as much space to Wyndham Beawes (the author of an oft reprinted eighteenth-century merchant manual) as to William Blackstone or to Stuart, as Trivellato does when she discusses the "distant echoes" of the "legend" in England, but canonicity within the field of merchant manual writing and canonicity per se are clearly different phenomena. Canonicity cannot, Trivellato would agree, be a simple matter of edition counting or readership estimating,

and it also cannot, she argues, be the retrospective application of the preferences and fads of our own or our forebears' time, but finding a consistent and compelling route between these options is easier said than done. The case of Steuart provides a good example: "Steuart's treatise on political economy," she writes, "could not compete in originality with the economic writings of such giants of his time as Quesnay, Cantillon, Turgot, Hume, and Smith, but it is estimated [by Keith Tribe] that outside of Britain, through the 1780s, it was better known and more frequently cited than *The Wealth of Nations*" (p. 172). Some writers are more gigantic, some more original, some better known, some more cited, and so on, across a terrain with shifting geographical and chronological boundaries.

The way that Trivellato positions herself in relation to other scholars who have challenged the canon of economic literature (or, more accurately, presented alternative canons) is, as such, somewhat problematic. She dismisses the list of "economic bestsellers" compiled by Ken Carpenter, formerly of Harvard Business School's Kress Library, who has dedicated much of his life to challenging the canons of economic literature from a historical-bibliographic perspective, even though Carpenter's point—that the books we now treat as canonical were not the most read in the past—and hers align comfortably. Similarly, she suggests that Sophus Reinert "relied entirely" on that (admittedly, indeed intentionally, circumscribed) corpus of texts, when in fact the data set he used included around 2,500 translations (*Translating Empire* [2011], 45), among them many merchant manuals. The criteria for inclusion (Carpenter's ten or more editions; Carpenter-Reinert's threshold of explicit theorization; Trivellato's availability in large, word-searchable databases like Gale's) may differ, and for different purposes, but all bibliographic corpora include and exclude certain texts for reasons inextricably tied to the moment of their creation and the attitudes of their creators. Looking ahead from the era of Google Books to a rapidly arriving age of access-superabundance, moreover, ever more discerning criteria (and the various alternative canons they produce) rather than increasingly indiscriminate ones (and the shapeless anticanons they produce) may become both more necessary and more valuable than continuing to criticize the canons of the access-poor past, ideological though they may have been, that we are exploding in the access-rich present.

In an erudite aside Trivellato notes that, several years before the publication of Cleirac's compendium of sea laws, the Genoese jurist Raffaele della Torre, in his *Tractatus de cambiis*, had metaphorically likened the historical development of financial exchanges (*cambia*) to "a river

formed from a multiplicity of small contributory streams—a metaphor that signaled the impossibility of determining with precision where the river originated” (p. 179). Although scholars have, of course, learned much since, this metaphor remains compelling, for, as Trivellato notes, the best scholarship says that the bill of exchange “went through a long period of incubation and incremental evolution” over a period of centuries, from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century, and has no precise or pinpointable origin or originator (p. 21). Like the seventeenth-century jurist, Trivellato looks to the natural world for a metaphor of her own for the transmission and development of the “legend” over time, and she settles on the topography geologists call Karst, which is full of sinkholes and caverns and underground drainage systems and is replete with streams that abruptly disappear. “Most [of these] streams continue to flow underground,” she notes, “but occasionally, some reemerge and erode the surface” (p. 192). This metaphor makes clear what she describes as the “central struggle of her inquiry”—understanding the stable, but, over time and in different contexts, incredibly mutable associations of Jews with money in the postmedieval Christian discursive tradition—and it more than suggests, distressingly, the likelihood that these ideas are still flowing underground only to one day emerge again to erode the surface.

Trivellato’s essential new book is resolutely historical, but it is also (and intentionally, as she makes clear in her preface) very much a book of our times, written in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, and a book for our times, when anti-Semitism is once again on the rise in Europe and the United States, when old conspiracy theories are crowding facts out of the public square, and when fears about finance and the paper money economy are again summoning up right-wing populism and affecting political change on a grand and frightening scale. Rather than the dissonances, it is sometimes the consonances, between the distant past and the uncomfortable present, that have a harsh ring, as when Trivellato writes, “Cleirac’s Jews were phantoms of the past that allowed his readers to make sense of the present” (p. 48). Is it possible to watch the coverage of a figure like George Soros, even in “mainstream” right-wing media outlets like Fox News, and not worry that such phantoms are emerging again from underground? In *Promise and Peril*, Trivellato holds out two figures as guiding lights: Jonathan Israel, whose transition to emeritus status opened up the position she recently filled at the Institute for Advanced Study, and the late Albert O. Hirschman. Israel’s goal, she notes, in his early and groundbreaking work *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750* (1985), was to “weave Jewish history into

the fabric of European history, not to confine it to a separate sphere” (p. 223). And amid a long historiographical silence, it was Hirschman who first resurrected Montesquieu’s discussion of the Jewish invention of bills of exchange (and it was from this discussion, as can be seen above, that he took the title of his 1977 classic, *The Passions and the Interests*) in order to argue for commerce’s interdependence with democracy and ability to resist (or, as Montesquieu says, to “elude”) authoritarian violence. He also, crucially, argued that the received late twentieth-century disciplinary (or canonical) boundaries of economics did not exist in the eighteenth century or earlier and would have to be passed through or torn down in order to understand the earliest “political arguments” for capitalism. In *Promise and Peril*, an important book deserving the widest possible readership across disciplines, Trivellato has shown herself to be the heir of both Israel and Hirschman. She has also shown herself as adept at “close and contextual reading” as she was with the very different approach and techniques (though in both there is a crucial interplay between the small and large scale) of her first English-language book, *The Familiarity of Strangers*, one of the most important business histories of the last four decades, which was based on the enormous extant commercial correspondence (more than thirteen thousand letters) of two Sephardic merchant families (p. 9). The subject of *Familiarity* was a firm, and its subject was how trust functioned in the global commerce of the eighteenth century. The subject of Trivellato’s new book is a forgotten “legend” about medieval Jews, and its subject is nothing less than the making of the modern world.