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TRADERS IN EXILE: QUAKERS AND JEWS OF NEW YORK AND
NEWPORT IN THE NEW WORLD ECONOMY, 1650-1776

The Johns Hopkins University

Ph.D. 1982

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PRE

TRADERS IN EXILE:
QUAKERS AND JEWS OF NEW YORK AND NEWPORT
IN THE
NEW WORLD ECONOMY,
1650-1776

by

Daniel Snyder

A dissertation submitted to The Johns Hopkins University
in conformity with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland
1982

ABSTRACT

Seventeenth-century New York and Newport were unlikely candidates to become the thriving commercial centers they were by 1750. The colony of New York, chasing the fur trade up into Canada and growing restless under New York City's monopoly of trade, might well have left the city behind as the economy of the region grew. Newport was an obscure outpost where the remnants of Puritan excesses came seeking toleration not trade.

Without a significant re-orientation of their economy, both towns might well have remained minor trading dependencies of Boston and Philadelphia. The Quakers and Jews provided just what was needed when they sparked the diversification of the economy of both towns. Both groups performed various services for New York and Newport which those societies were not able to accomplish on their own. Both participated in the earliest "adventures" to the West Indies and thereby demonstrated the profitability of that trade. Both groups also played a crucial role in establishing patterns of coastal trade. The profound differences between the nature of the two groups was also echoed

in the economic realm. The Quakers, in converting so many of the disaffected English men and women in Rhode Island and on Long Island, oriented hinterlands to ports and helped channel goods for the West Indies trade from sources to markets. Large numbers of artisans and craftsmen within the Quaker ranks provided personnel for the developing infrastructure of the two towns and built the ships and fashioned the containers in which goods were transported. Jews, on the other hand, worked the interstitial space between the parts of the emerging world system and moved in and out of the gaps in the national compartments of the New World. Through these openings the Jews brought not only valuable goods but, more importantly, the specie and hard money for which there was a constant demand in the colonies.

For both groups, this was network economics. Both had strong ethno-religious identities which bound their members together in more extensive ways than those open to other merchants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Out of their sufferings, each group had formed a pan-Atlantic community which both used for trade. With co-religionists at strategic points throughout the Atlantic World, each group had dependable channels for the flow of not only goods but the information, credit, and trust without which that trade was impossible. All this meant that network trade greatly reduced the risks inherent in the New World economy.

Membership in these groups, however, also brought constraints on economic behavior as well as providing pathways. These constraints limited what members could do, but had the beneficial effect of focusing their energies and pushing them into early specialization.

Quakers and Jews came to New York and Newport because these were among the most tolerant places in the Atlantic World, but also because the social space was loose and wide open. This was true because of a complex interaction of forces which linked attitudes toward these groups in places as far apart as Lima, Peru, Amsterdam, Lisbon, and London. This interaction of attitudes meant attitudes toward the groups and the groups' conceptions of themselves were part of a unified semantic field with the Nations and the Hosts simultaneously defining each other.

The economic growth which these groups helped catalyze became so intense that by the 1750s, the groups had been put out of business. Despite a last minute move to Newport by the Jews in the 1750s and attempts to link the networks of the two groups, their secrets of trade had become common knowledge. The emerging culture of capitalism soon routinized most of the risks the Quakers and Jews alone had been able to take. As religious groups, both Quakers and Jews continued to fare well, but as trade diasporas they were subsumed under the capitalist world economy.

PREFACE

Scattered through the growing body of work on the economy of early America, there are literally hundreds of references to Jews and Quakers. With the exception of studies on Philadelphia, almost all of them are made only in passing and no systematic, thorough study of the economic activities of either one of these two groups has been written. As a result, the economic history of the period and especially that of New York and Newport is incomplete. This dissertation represents an attempt to take a first step in providing a remedy for this condition.

The study grows directly out of the Program in Atlantic History, Culture and Society at The Johns Hopkins University of which I was lucky enough to be a member. The program was founded with the intention of focusing the attention of an interdisciplinary array of scholars on the linked past and shared experiences of societies bordering the Atlantic. It was precisely the broader perspective of this program which enabled me to see the activities of these two groups in a more meaningful context. I have used the methodology of economic anthropology, especially the concept of the trade diaspora, to study the groups and

in doing so several interesting unities in the general process of economic change in the various Atlantic societies have emerged.

The ethnic and religious diversity of New York and Newport gives these two towns much more in common with the rest of the Atlantic world than Massachusetts or Virginia, the mainstays of early American history, and makes the application of these rather unconventional perspectives easier. They show that in their early history these towns resemble their West African counterparts as much as they do either London or Amsterdam. This history of our past has usually been written in terms of what makes us unique, and it is often difficult to see how much we have in common with areas which we now view as somehow underdeveloped. The results, however, of such a shift in perspective will go a long way to completing our understanding of the development of our own economy as well as filling in the gaps in the history of these two groups.

The study, then, is about the Quakers and Jews as much as it is about the economy of New York and Newport. Two groups in two towns over more than a century: an ambitious undertaking for a doctoral dissertation. It was not my ambition which lured me into this complex undertaking but rather my naive desire to understand what the presence of these two groups meant for early America. What kept me going

was the discovery that the history of the two groups was linked in a concrete, not merely analytical fashion. In the very beginning of the period covered and again at the very end, the two groups came to rely on each other and it is this aspect of their shared history which I found fascinating. The complexity and the breadth of the topic led to organizational problems which seemed insurmountable. The form the work now assumes takes the reader through the arduous steps I had to take in order to arrive at that understanding which was my original goal. In a different guise the dissertation will doubtless undergo some rather drastic restructuring.

* * *

I am deeply indebted to the entire community of scholars at Johns Hopkins. Whatever virtues there are in this study are theirs. The faculty and graduate students participating in the Atlantic Program provided constant stimulation and insight. Much of the methodology used here was learned from Professor Philip D. Curtin. I learned my basic anthropology from Professor Kathleen Ryan and my sensitivity to the ironies of the past from Ronald G. Walters. Above all I am indebted to my advisor Jack P. Greene who tolerated me as an unruly graduate student. Without his careful guidance and editing, this study would never have been completed.

More than that, however, his generosity as a teacher is unsurpassed.

Many of my fellow graduate students have helped in untold ways. The members of Professor Greene's seminar read and criticized almost every word in an extraordinarily constructive way. James Merrell and Keith Mason were the best of friends to boot. At the earliest, formative stage, David Glassberg was a constant companion with whom I shared many hours setting off intellectual fireworks and laughing away the anxiety that accompanies getting started on a dissertation.

The staffs of the various libraries and historical societies where most of the unpublished documents are to be found also deserve thanks. These include the American Jewish Archives at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the Newport Historical Society. In Newport, Mr. Frederick King and Mrs. Gladys Bolhouse deserve special mention for their help.

My family has stood by me through thick and through thin, and there is nothing like a somewhat skeptical mother-in-law to provide the motivation needed to finish. My wife Martha knows how much her love means to me, so there is no need to embarrass her here.

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PROLOGUE

PREPREF

CHAPTER I

QUAKERS AND JEWS IN THE COLONIAL ECONOMY TOWARDS A
NEW THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

"The Quakers and the Jews are the Men nowadays," wrote Gerard Beekman, the scion of the large Anglo-Dutch New York family in 1761.¹ He was referring to their importance in the economy of what historians have come to call the upper mid-Atlantic region and what he wrote was true. The histories of the two major cities of that region, New York and Newport, Rhode Island, were inseparably tied in the colonial period to the development and growth of their commerce with the West Indies, and the contribution made by the Quakers and Jews to that trade in both cities was extensive and fundamental.² On the microeconomic level, the increased volume of trade was in large part responsible for the transformation of both towns from frontier villages and simple "shipping points" into multidimensional "comprehensive entrepots" which functioned not only as transshipment points for colonial goods out of the hinterland, but as financial, administrative and manufacturing centers.³ On the macroeconomic level, the growth of the West Indies trade out of these towns helped to shift the economic center of North America to the mid-Atlantic and to displace Boston, which had been the dominant port of the previous century. The development of a provision trade out of the middle colonies meant reduced shipping costs,

the result of the shorter distances involved in the run to the West Indies. These greater cost efficiencies for both producer and consumer brought the "South Atlantic System" for the production of monocrops on large plantations in the colonial New World to its apogee.⁴ The resulting increase in complexity and competition in the commercial realm was an important part of larger processes which brought about the final collapse of the edifice of British mercantilist thought and ultimately the end of the British Empire in the New World.

The tragic irony in all of these developments is that by the end of the period covered in this work the process these two groups helped to initiate created economic and cultural forces so powerful as to jeopardize their very existence. What Beekman had overlooked was the fact that Quakers and Jews had made their unique contribution as separate, distinct groups much earlier in the colonial period. By the time he wrote in the 1760s, they were still important in the colonial economy but not as Quakers and Jews. Rather, they were significant as individuals who had assimilated to the dominant Anglo-American culture. From the 1650s through the 1740s, things had been different. These groups made their contribution during this earlier period precisely because they were different, not because they were simply better at doing

what everyone else was also doing. The same forces which threatened the distinctiveness of both groups and pushed so many of their members into assimilation also helped to erase the traces of these early contributions from the official record. For as the capitalist economy emerged full blown in the region, it also generated new ways of conceptualizing itself, and this new economic theory overlooked the importance of Quakers and Jews. By sparking this economic growth, Quakers and Jews in effect put themselves out of business and were left as buried economic artifacts.

In its simplest form, the thesis of this work is that Quakers and Jews were able to make a significant contribution to these processes because their religious beliefs put them in a uniquely ambiguous relationship with the dominant Anglo-American cultures. Intent on preserving their beliefs, traditions, and forms of worship, both groups found in Newport and, after some initial difficulties, in New York, havens from the series of persecutions and banishments which had driven them into the New World. The Jews, of course, had fled for their lives from the Catholic Inquisition of Spain, Portugal, and other areas of the world under Iberian sway. The Quakers fled from the harassment, imprisonment, and even hangings at the hand of their more orthodox brethren. Both Quakers and Jews came to Newport and New York at almost the

same time and both came by way of and maintained strong connections with the West Indies. Out of their sufferings each group had formed a pan-Atlantic community which both groups used for trade. With co-religionists at strategic points throughout the Atlantic world, each group had dependable channels for the flow of not only goods but the information, credit, and trust without which that trade was impossible.

Both groups were in exile, then, although for the Jews there was a stronger sense of physical isolation from a homeland. The Quakers' sense of exile was more one of spiritual alienation from the World around them. For the Jews, Zion was in Israel, even at this early period; for the Quakers, it was within themselves and could be reached anywhere the corrupt World could be held at bay. This sense of alienation and persecution was strongly bound up with their conception of themselves as a group and their relationship with the societies in which they found themselves. It was articulated in theologies which, despite great apparent differences, have much in common. Both groups referred to themselves as Children of Israel and both linked their circumstances in exile with a cosmology of Divine Light which carried with it a mystical imperative for them to gather together in the wilderness. As Frederick Tolles has noted, "In

their religious experience George Fox and his compeers had more in common with the Hebrew Prophets than with the great mystics of the [Christian] Church."⁵

These religious similarities are echoed in the economic realm. Both groups performed various services for New York and Newport which those societies were not able to accomplish on their own initiative. Both groups participated in the earliest "adventures" to the West Indies and thereby demonstrated the profitability of that trade. Both groups also played a crucial role in establishing patterns of coastal trade which, although of only moderate importance in later periods, was significant in the early period for its role in sling-shotting goods and merchants up and down the coast in search of an ideal location. A secondary effect of this process was an early source of intercolonial contact and cooperation.⁶

These similarities are almost trivial when contrasted to the vast differences between the two groups. When one examines their liturgy, ritual, and organization, it is obvious that they are at opposite ends of the religious spectrum. Jews had an elaborate ritual but almost no organizational structures extending beyond the local congregation. In contrast, Quakers called for elimination of all liturgy and ritual but had an elaborate organization with five tiers culminating in their Yearly Meeting. In addition, members