

# RESPINNING AN OLD YARN: JEWS AND THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN USED CLOTHING

*Adam Mendelsohn*

A pungent fug hung over the Old Clothes Exchange in the East End of London, bursting forth anew whenever a ragman opened a sack to reveal his daily harvest of cast-off clothing. The smell and noise of this crowded marketplace was routinely remarked upon by visitors who ventured to what, by the 1840s, had become a shabby site of pilgrimage for slum explorers and journalists. Startled by (and relishing) the exotic scene, few were attuned to the sophistication of the market that they wandered through. What they saw was a central node in an international Jewish ethnic economy that, at its height, stretched from Rag Fair, an impromptu bazaar in Gold Rush Melbourne, to the slave plantations of the American South.

Historians have long been interested in the position of Jews in commodity chains—slaves, spices, grain, cattle, diamonds, coral—in the early modern period. For the most part, these networks were closed to those without capital and consanguinity. By contrast we still know surprisingly little about Jewish participation in international commerce in the modern period, with the exception of Sarah Abrevaya Stein's recent study of the global trade in ostrich feathers. Although the feather trade was characteristic of extractive commodity chains in the long nineteenth century, with agents on the colonial periphery supplying the metropole via a hub and spoke model, Jews were involved in several other branches of international commerce that did not follow this

unidirectional and capital intensive pattern. Modern markets created demand for a panoply of new consumer commodities, and commoditized goods that had previously been of limited value and circulation. Nowhere was this change more dramatic than in the collection and resale of used clothing. Whereas the market for used clothing had once been mostly local, new sources of demand in the first decades of the nineteenth century transformed worn garments into an internationally traded commodity.

## THE COLLECTION AND RESALE OF SECONDHAND CLOTHES HAD BEEN A STAPLE OCCUPATION OF THE JEWISH UNDERCLASS IN ENGLAND FROM AT LEAST THE MIDDLE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND LONGER ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE.

The collection and resale of secondhand clothes had been a staple occupation of the Jewish underclass in England from at least the middle of the eighteenth century and longer elsewhere in Europe. This early presence is critical to explaining the centrality of the garment trade to modern Jewish economic history. Longstanding Jewish participation in the trade positioned Jews to take full advantage of the rapid expansion of international demand for used clothing in the first half of the nineteenth century, driven by national and imperial expansion and the rising buying power of the working classes. The Jewish clothing niche became increasingly

elaborate and sophisticated as dealers adapted to new opportunities for profit at home and abroad. This ramification provided a critical advantage in the second half of the century as the market shifted again.

Jewish dealers were able to draw upon existing skills, production techniques and distribution chains to shift into the mass manufacture of cheap ready-made garments. This transition ultimately provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants to the United States and England through the 1920s.

The secondhand garment trade has also been largely absent from studies of Jewish labor and the immigrant experience. Even as the sweatshop has been double-stitched

into popular and scholarly memory of the Jewish immigration to the United States and England, the secondhand clothing trade has frayed and been forgotten. And yet for much of the nineteenth century, Jews dominated the collection, salvaging, and resale of used clothing in both countries. This was a substantial business: before the Civil War most Americans dressed in homespun or secondhand clothing. Although by the middle decades of the century, mass-manufactured garments cut out an expanding section of the clothing market, demand for used clothing accelerated in the colonies of the British Empire, in the American South, and on the western frontier. During these same decades, a

cohort of Jews with expertise in the used-clothing trade discovered that their unglamorous occupation provided a major advantage when entering the nascent ready-made garment industry. By the end of the century an international ethnic economy built upon cast-off clothing had been tapered and transformed into one centered on the mass manufacture of cheap clothing in Leeds, London, and New York's Lower East Side.



"The Peddler's Wagon," wood engraving drawn by Charles Green Bush. Reprinted from *Harper's Weekly* 12, no. 599 (June 20, 1868): 393. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov.

This outcome would seem an unlikely prospect to a visitor to the Old Clothes Exchange in the early 1840s, on the cusp of the mass industrialization of clothing manufacture. The 7,000-square foot clothes bourse was supplied by a legion of Jewish old-clothes men (few itinerant collectors were women) who trudged the streets of London, chanting "old clo'" to attract customers willing to barter worn garments for flowers, cheap crockery, and jewelry. They converged every afternoon at the Exchange to sell their spoils. The dealers who picked through these tattered garments had three markets in mind. "First class" clothes could be "revived [*sic*], tricked, polished, teased, re-napped, and sold" to retailers or pawned for profit. The cleaning, patching, and stitching necessary to transform ragged clothing into saleable garments was done within the surrounding neighborhoods, part of an ethnic service economy that sprung up around the clothing trade. "Second class" clothing was exported to the settlement colonies, Holland, Ireland, and the Americas. "Third class" clothing was unsalvageable. Woolen clothing too

tattered for reuse was purchased for recycling by the shoddy mill; linen shirts beyond repair were bought for paper mills.

Court records reveal that dealers were astute speculators. Some clothing changed hands multiple times on the Exchange within a single day, passed between dealers until it found a purchaser confident of extracting the maximum value upon resale. Dealers appear to have

the second hand habiliments of the empire" passed through the marketplace at some point in their life cycle. A substantial portion of this clothing was exported to the United States, seemingly to the Jewish dealers who dominated the used clothing market in New York.

If Petticoat Lane became synonymous with Jews and the street trade in old clothes in London in the mid-nineteenth

## STARTING IN THE 1830s, RESIDENTS AND VISITORS TO THE CITY BEGAN TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE VOLUBILITY AND VIGOR OF JEWISH SALESMEN WHO WAYLAID AND WHEEDED PASSING PEDESTRIANS.

specialized in different categories of clothing. They were certainly a cosmopolitan group; Irishmen competed with Jewish buyers from France, Holland, central Europe, and North Africa. According to a contemporary observer, the Old Clothes Exchange handled the export of about twelve bales of cast-off clothing and fabric each week. By one exaggerated estimate, "half

century, Chatham Street was its New York counterpart. Starting in the 1830s, residents and visitors to the city began to complain about the volubility and vigor of Jewish salesmen who waylaid and wheedled passing pedestrians. As in London, the area was a patchwork of slops-sellers, hawkers, and used-clothes dealers selling to a working class clientele. Their stock was a mix of

imported and local garments, the latter comprising forfeited pledges from pawnbrokers, wardrobes sold by the impecunious, and clothing collected by peddlers. Although Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago also had streets tightly packed with Jewish clothiers, the old clo' dealers of Chatham Street became embedded in the popular imagination. This reputation was exported overseas. In the 1860s and 1870s, foreigners in Canton, China, referred to a street of old clothes sellers as the "Chatham Street" of the city.

Jewish dealers in New York purchased used clothing to ship to the South and West. Demand was particularly strong from plantation owners who purchased cheap fabric and slops to outfit their slaves. Perhaps because of their shoddy and drab work clothing, slaves with access to a small income often spent their limited earnings on ostentatious finery. Much of this was sold or bartered by Jewish peddlers. A willingness to barter was essential. Many rural and poor urban customers had little access to ready money, but had plenty of items that an enterprising traveling salesman could resell for profit in a market where such goods were scarcer.

Rags—clothing and fabric beyond repair—and tattered garments formed a central part of this barter economy. In nineteenth-century America, rags were collected in greater quantities than any other domestic recyclable. In many households rags were collected by women, who also interacted directly with the peddler and often

controlled the spending of this "rag-money." Not only did rags and old clothing serve as a currency for the peddler and his customers, but also as a commodity valued by the wholesalers and dealers who supplied the peddler with his merchandise. Rather than returning to the depot for resupply with an empty pack or wagon, the peddler carried recyclables that he could trade at a favorable rate of exchange for new stock. Some retailers and wholesalers collected rags directly from peddlers for barter or sale to

centrifugal system dispatched the garments in bulk to distant markets, often to be distributed and sold by co-ethnics. This dynamic commercial chain could easily be turned to the distribution of ready-made clothing once the input costs of manufacturing declined. Indeed Jewish used clothing dealers were fortuitously positioned for this transition.

Although the Jews who traded in used clothing in London and New York competed against one another,

they also formed a mutually advantageous cluster of expertise in repair and cheap retailing. Dealers who subcontracted the cleaning and repair of worn and damaged clothing to others were able to transfer the methods of putting out and piecework to the sewing of new

clothing. They could draw upon a pool of local contractors and workers familiar with this system. They also gained a competitive advantage over their competitors by drawing upon existing distribution chains to market new merchandise. In London, the Old Clothes Exchange became a channel for the distribution of new clothing. In the United States, the peddlers who supplied dealers with worn garments from the countryside now carried new clothing to sell to their provincial and rural consumers. Potential customers already came to Petticoat Lane and Chatham Street in search of bargains. These same shoppers, whose disposable income and purchasing power were boosted by the growing industrial economy, were the target market for the cheap

ALTHOUGH THE JEWS WHO TRADED IN USED CLOTHING IN LONDON AND NEW YORK COMPETED AGAINST ONE ANOTHER, THEY ALSO FORMED A MUTUALLY ADVANTAGEOUS CLUSTER OF EXPERTISE IN REPAIR AND CHEAP RETAILING. DEALERS WHO SUBCONTRACTED THE CLEANING AND REPAIR OF WORN AND DAMAGED CLOTHING TO OTHERS WERE ABLE TO TRANSFER THE METHODS OF PUTTING OUT AND PIECEWORK TO THE SEWING OF NEW CLOTHING.

shoddy mills and paper manufacturers. Others relied on middlemen who aggregated the raw material for bulk sale and shipping. As in Britain, used clothing collected by peddlers and ragmen in America was more valuable if repaired than if resold as scrap. Such salvaged clothing was bought by dealers, mended, and restored in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, and then shipped to the South and West for resale.

Thus the used garment trade operated as a series of interconnected circulatory systems. A centripetal system aggregated clothing collected by ragmen in London and peddlers in the South, adding value by repairing and sorting this motley harvest. A

fashions sold by manufacturing retailers.

While several clothing dealers rapidly (and profitably) exchanged the used clothing business for manufacturing—most prominently Henry Moses—there is little to suggest that Jewish traders were more attuned to the vagaries of the market, or more flexible in forsaking older patterns of conducting business. Many Jewish ragmen and dealers remained in the secondhand trade, or traded in both used and new clothes. Even after some of the most successful of the early Jewish manufacturers left the public trappings of the old clothing business behind, their businesses often remained in a symbiotic relationship with the secondhand trade. E. Moses & Son, for example, the most successful of the early Jewish retailers of cheap ready-made clothing in London, offered suits on yearly contract, essentially a

lease scheme that required the return of the worn jackets and trousers after a year in exchange for a new set. This retailer profited twice, retailing the new garments and reselling the used suits on the secondhand market. Yet over time those who remained dependent on used clothing were squeezed by competition from ready-made clothing emporia and the declining prices of new garments.

The concentration of Jews in the secondhand trade ensured that even if few dealers successfully transitioned to manufacturing, a substantial proportion of them were Jewish. Although clothing producers suffered high rates of bankruptcy since demand oscillated during periods of boom and bust, Jewish manufacturers developed an additional ethnic edge. The arrival of scores of poor Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe provided an easily exploitable labor pool for the

expansion of the subcontracting system. Whereas these immigrants might have once been drawn into the bottom rungs of the clothing trade as rag collectors and peddlers, many more now became the poorly paid sewers and cutters who underpinned an entire ethnic economy.

The secondhand clothing business played a profoundly consequential role in modern Jewish economic history. Unjustly discarded by Jewish historical memory, it is time for this unglamorous trade to come out of the closet to be properly aired, if not “revived, tricked, polished, teased, [and] re-napped.”

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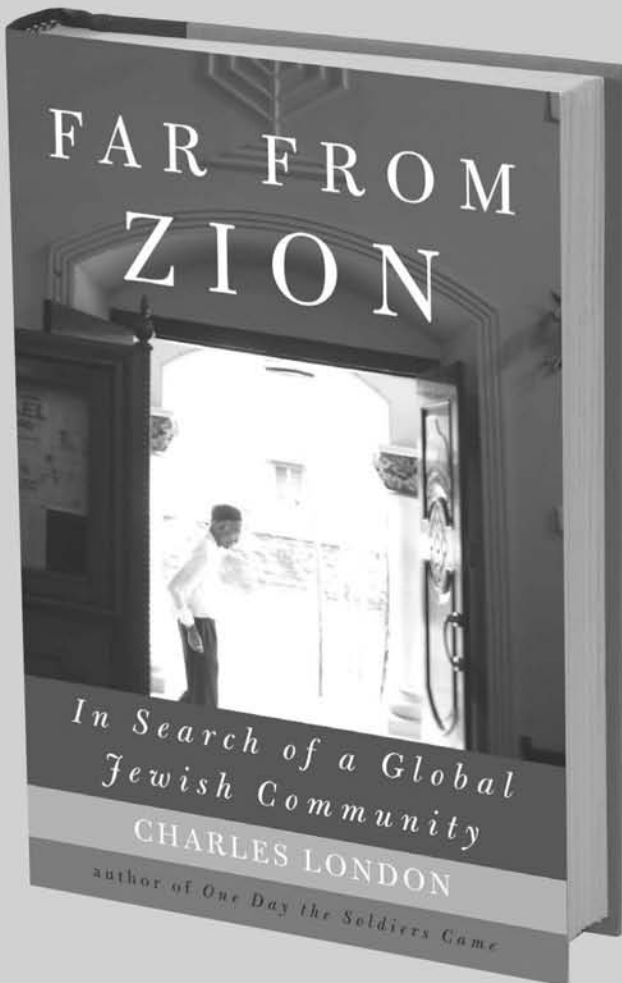
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