



Professional Re-Stratification of the Jews in the Works of Oxaal/Weitzmann and Blohm/Cahen

Pavel Vasilyev

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Essay from the year 2009 in the subject Jewish Studies, grade: B+, University CEU San Pablo Madrid, language: English, abstract: In his 1781 essay, “Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews”, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, one of the key leaders of the German Aufklärung, famously stated that “everything the Jews are blamed for is caused by the political conditions under which they now live”. This was one of the arguments in favor of the Jewish Emancipation, and it implied that the Jews would improve their economic position and move from “corrupt” occupations in usury and commerce into more “productive” professions (primarily, agriculture) once full civil equality is achieved and all repressive laws are abolished. The similar rationale was behind the reforms that Joseph II initiated in Austria in the 1780s. In general, Enlightenment thinkers and policy-makers believed that the unequal distribution of the Jews in various sectors of the economy was the product of the feudal corporate society. Thus, the Emancipation was supposed to change the situation radically and provide a more just allocation of the Jewish specialists into different professions.

However, it proved just not to be true. The first major social change in post-Enlightenment Europe, the French Revolution, brought the Jews full civil equality. The years that followed it, however, showed that the Jews were unwilling to abandon their traditional occupations and business strategies and migrate to the agricultural professions. Moreover, in its own turn it might have been one of the reasons behind the Napoleonic backlash in the mid-1800s.

In this essay I will discuss whether Emancipation of Jews in Europe in the nineteenth century was actually followed by the desired change in Jewish economic position and occupational strategies. In doing so, I will concentrate on the two countries where legal emancipation had already been achieved by the end of the nineteenth century – Austria and the Netherlands, as presented by Ivar Oxaal and Walter R. Weitzmann and J. C. H. Blom and J. J. Cahen. To achieve the above-mentioned goal, I should analyze several major problems: 1) Jewish outcomes in terms of economic position (alleged and real wealth and poverty in the Jewish communities); 2) over-representation and under-representation of the Jews in certain sectors of the economy; and 3) the reasons behind various career strategies of the Jews and various possible explanations of specifically Jewish economic behavior.

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