

[Nielsen on Lehmann, 'The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, January 18, 2023

Matthias B. Lehmann. *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022. 400 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-5036-3030-7](#).



Reviewed by Philipp Nielsen (Sarah Lawrence College) **Published on** H-German (January, 2023)
Commissioned by Matthew Unangst (SUNY Oneonta)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58362>

Matthias B. Lehmann's important new book, *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century*, chronicles the life and work of Maurice de Hirsch (born Moritz von Hirsch in Munich in 1831), who died in Paris in 1896 as one of the most famous men of his time—loved, respected, and vilified in equal measure. Descending from a recently ennobled Jewish banking family, Moritz was sent to school in Brussels as a teenager not least to escape the discriminatory anti-Jewish laws in Bavaria to which even his upper-class family was still subjected. There he socialized in the right circles through his family's connections and married Clara Bischoffsheim, the daughter of another prominent banking family. Soon Hirsch became a successful banker in his own right, but he rose to international fame first through his role in the construction of Ottoman railways through the Balkans to Constantinople and then through the founding of the Jewish Settlement Association (JCA), at the time "the largest charitable foundation in the world" (1). The aim of the JCA was to solve "the Jewish question" by facilitating the migration of millions of eastern European Jews to farmland acquired by the foundation in Latin America, primarily in Argentina.

Considering that Hirsch is "one of the most important yet understudied figures in modern Jewish history" according to Lehmann, a biography in itself would already have been an immense contribution to the field (p. 7). Lehmann, however, aims for more and succeeds. *The Baron* combines elements of economic, political, and imperial histories of European Jews. Maurice de Hirsch serves as the vector of this story, his life evidence to Lehmann that not all European Jewish history of the nineteenth century followed increasingly national and even nationalist lines. Lehmann argues that "Jews [in Europe] were seeking to become 'civilized,' to become *Europeans*" rather than members of a singly country, and in this process, they were part of transnational developments, increasingly driven by capitalism, imperialism, and mass migration (pp. 8-9). National stories of European Jews have already been complicated by the accounts of transnational family connections and concepts of solidarity and their sundering with the outbreak of the war in 1914.[1] Yet for the most part, European Jewish history, as long as it is not specifically on migration, follows national lines. The transnational identity certainly rings true for Hirsch. Stefan Zweig, whom Lehmann quotes too, also lovingly describes the border-crossing lives of the central European bourgeoisie, with their encounters on Belgian beaches and in Bohemian spas.[2] Lehmann is particularly strong at linking the social life of Hirsch and his social circle to his professional life, that is, the construction of a

European railway network that made the former possible. But for most eastern Europeans the transnational reality that Lehmann describes raises the question of whether a life lived affected by transnational developments or even involving crossing multiple borders while migrating, is also a life lived with a transnational identity. If the first question raised by Lehmann's argument about the aspired European identity of Jews relates to social class, the second relates to time. For the most part, *The Baron* chronicles a thirty-year stretch, beginning with the first contract between Hirsch and the Ottoman government in 1869 and Hirsch's move to Paris two years later, and ending with his wife Clara's death in 1899. Nationalist politics which force national positions on European Jews, from the Dreyfus affair and German and especially Austrian antisemitic nationalism to the increasing attempts to forge an Ottoman national identity, already encroach here. What Lehmann then needs to answer is whether this European Jewish story is potentially only specific to these decades of the late nineteenth century, or also provides a paradigm beyond it.

As to the first question, Lehmann skillfully uses the social history surrounding Hirsch's railroad ventures and his philanthropy to tell the story of many more lives than the baron's alone. From the very opening, using two portraits of Hirsch late in his life, one depicting him in an Oriental fantasy costume taken in 1888 in Constantinople, the other as a Jewish philanthropist in European dress hanging in a farmhouse in Argentina, Lehmann places Hirsch at the intersection of Jewish acculturation, Jewish philanthropy and especially the discourse on productivization and settlement, and European cultural and economic imperialism. As to the second question, Lehmann comes close to answering it late in the book.

Lehmann's book is divided into four thematic and mostly chronological sections. It first narrates the private life of Hirsch and his family. In the second section, it moves to his public persona from his involvement in building Ottoman railways, the most important of which, both politically and financially, was the link from the Austro-Hungarian Empire through the Balkans to Constantinople. It then turns to his growing engagement in the world of Jewish philanthropy in the third section, and finally, in the fourth, to his legacy project following the premature death of his only son, Lucien, in 1887: the resettlement of Russian Jews on agricultural farms in Argentina. Hirsch cut a towering figure during his lifetime. He was friends with European aristocracy and royalty, entertaining, for example, the Austrian crown prince Rudolf and the president of the French Republic at his country estates of St. Johann and St. Germain. At the same time European antisemites, especially Austrians, vilified him as the epitome of "Jewish finance." During his time, however, the admiration outweighed the hostility. A who's who of Europe's Jewish and non-Jewish elite attended Hirsch's funeral in 1896 in Paris. Notably for someone otherwise not particularly observant and who had advocated for the fusion of Jews with their surrounding society by conversion, the chief rabbi of France officiated the funeral.

Despite this larger-than-life stature in his day, Hirsch has since been mostly forgotten. Without spelling it out, Lehmann suggests that his non-Zionist perspective—the very political philanthropy of Hirsch, "Jewish self-emancipation without Jewish nationalism" (p. 13)—is the reason for this historical disappearance, as in the wake of the Holocaust Zionism has dominated the interpretation of Jewish history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lehmann cannot entirely decide, however, if Hirsch's approach was in fact just as modern and timely (p. 290) as socialism and Zionism, or whether the last attempt of "the gilded age of Jewish philanthropy" to answer "the Jewish question" before such an approach was superseded by these two ideologies (pp. 289-290). Considering the

relative failure of the settlement enterprise in particular, attracting Jews in the few thousands rather than millions as Hirsch had hoped, one would be tempted to say the latter. Yet the numbers of contemporaneous settlers in Ottoman Palestine were comparable to those of the JCA in Latin America.[3] Socialism in its Bundist and non-Bundist form, another alternative obliterated by the Holocaust, was the far more popular option.[4] And when it came to migration, then the numerically most successful movement out of eastern Europe was to the cities, be it in eastern Europe, further west on the continent, or across the Atlantic.

At the time, then, the relative success or failure of the JCA versus settlement projects in Ottoman Palestine was less clear. Here, the limitation of the lifespan of Hirsch himself has some disadvantages for Lehmann's account of the JCA. A little more about the afterlife of the foundation following Hirsch's death would have allowed Lehmann to make an argument for its continued importance past the late nineteenth century. In terms of numbers, it could not rival the other movements, but the JCA, for example, began to manage some of the early agricultural settlements in Palestine in 1900, taking over their administration from Baron de Rothschild's organization, thus blurring the boundaries between Zionist and non-Zionist schemes. And during the 1920s and particularly the 1930s, its Latin American settlements once more loomed large in European Jews' imaginary as they tried to leave the continent with many other routes of emigration closed to them.

The question of chronology returns in Lehmann's analysis of the structural difference between the JCA and organized Zionism. He argues that the JCA represented an earlier state in Jewish politics, as it embraced "technocratic management and social engineering" by "*mimicking* the modern state [while] political Zionism eventually embraced the idea of actually *creating* a state" (p. 290, emphases in the original). Considering the long and continued life of American philanthropic organizations from Carnegie to Mellon, whether that was a feature of philanthropic organizations of the late nineteenth century as Lehmann seems to suggest, thus rooting the JCA in a specific time, seems a little more debatable. For the narrower scope of Jewish settlement schemes, that might have been true, though here too non-Zionist ones continued to exist well into the 1920s. But on the larger scale of Jewish philanthropy, organizations such as Joint, which was founded in 1914 and still exists today, provide an example of a form of Jewish charitable politics not bent on creating a state and which were not confined to the nineteenth century, somewhat softening Lehmann's dichotomy. Here too, following the JCA into the twentieth century would have enriched these claims, but also exceeded the scope of a biography.

Covering Hirsch's life, considering the breadth of his activities, is an impressive feat, not least in light of the complicated archival situation. Before his death, Hirsch had all his private letters destroyed. Through extensive archival work, Lehmann nonetheless manages to bring his subject alive. In light of the preponderance of business letters, and Hirsch's dedication to his business and philanthropy, which reveals much about his persona as well, the decision to split the book into private and public life, however, is a little puzzling. It leads to a number of duplications and also makes each account on its own a little thinner than necessary. Hirsch's relationship with his son, and to some extent even with his wife, for example, is rendered livelier in the sections on the Ottoman railroad than in the family sections. And in return, some of the events recounted in the family section need to be repeated in order to make sense of Hirsch's business decisions. The full picture still emerges but narrating these two sides of his life more closely together might have made for a more organic account. While this is a matter of style, the actual economics of Hirsch's businesses arguably deserved fuller

attention. While Lehmann frequently refers to Hirsch's enormous wealth, which enabled his philanthropic endeavors, the precise nature of his investments before the Ottoman railway project, and even the profit he made from it, remains vague. Lehmann focuses mainly on Hirsch's actions, which is understandable for a biography but means that some of the larger business structures, especially those surrounding Hirsch's relationship with the Ottoman government and exceeding his personal contacts, receive only cursory mention. For example, the involvement of independent arbitrators and the fairly early involvement of Deutsche Bank, which would eventually buy his stake, valued at around 44 million francs after the acquisition in October 1890, get little mention. This means some of Hirsch's business life seems less a part of a large social network in the European world of business and finance than it actually was.[5].

The great strength of Lehmann's account lies in a different connection between the economic with the social. Throughout the book Lehmann provides an account of the social and cultural changes that the new economic and technological developments wrought in which Hirsch had a role: railroads and their financing. For the likes of Hirsch, entertaining at their various estates, in the case of the baron primarily in Paris, later also London and his estates in Bohemia, would not have been possible without rapid transport. Likewise, his dreams of settling millions of eastern European Jews in Argentina hinged on modern steam-powered infrastructure. Lehmann describes the effects of new railway lines on rural areas, the way that especially the so-called *Türkenlose*, Ottoman lottery bonds, which were sold to small investors primarily in Austria-Hungary and with which the Ottoman railway was financed, were used as a pretext for antisemitic attacks on Hirsch as a symbol of "Jewish finance" once their value collapsed in the 1870s. Here Lehmann truly writes a transnational history, though whether or not the people whose lives he describes considered themselves outside of national boundaries is less obvious.

Even if Hirsch had no particularly strong national leanings himself, Lehmann shows that he was far from being nonideological. His personal commitment to Judaism might have been tenuous, yet he never personally considered conversion—as distinct from his designs for Jews in general and even his three adopted children who were raised as Christians—and his commitment to his fellow Jews was strong. Even in those charitable ventures that were declared nondenominational, the focus often rested on Jews. Moreover, his belief in the idea of productivization, namely the retraining of Jews in agricultural professions and settling them on the land, overrode much of his very own business experience. So aware of the economic and social changes that railroads wrought—these formed a considerable part of the debates surrounding the Balkan railroad—Hirsch did not consider their effect on agriculture when it came to his settlement ideas. The JCA project of settling Jewish farmers on small family farms and initially denying them the raising of cattle and any use of hired labor was deeply ideological. Jews should work the land with their hands and not turn into employers or traders once more. Yet this was also deeply at odds with agricultural developments, both in grain and cattle farming. Steamships opened the European market to American imports, and the vast fertile lands of both North and South America favored large-scale industrial farming. In fact, in the 1880s and 1890s, when Hirsch and the JCA began to settle eastern European Jews in Argentina, the number of small independent farms in that country declined rapidly. Some of the farms the JCA bought were farms that had been given up by their previous owners for economic reasons. The often dire economic situation of the settlers as a result of these conditions, and their often insufficient agricultural training, led to protests and, in turn, severe responses by Hirsch. Hirsch once more adopted a harsher economic logic in which the settlers were not to be pampered, which was at once at odds

with the overarching goal as well as the fatherly image that the settlers had of Hirsch. Here, as in his accounts of the railway as well as philanthropic ventures in the Ottoman and Russian Empires, Lehmann is supremely attentive to the voices whose lives were affected by Hirsch's ventures.

Particularly in the latter sections that turn to his philanthropic endeavors and then to Argentina, the book fully lives up to Lehmann's goal of writing less a biography and more a social history of late nineteenth-century Jewish philanthropy and migration. In these chapters, Lehmann also grapples with the question of where a project such as the JCA should be located within European imperial history. While he does not overtly engage with the recent literature on Jewish settlement in Palestine and seeing or not seeing it as a form of settler colonialism, he describes Hirsch and the JCA as shaped by the world of empire.[6] He, his projects, and the Jews affected by and attracted to them, have to be understood in that context rather than in that of nations and nationalism only. This in fact might be the formulation that also captures Lehmann's overall arch better than that of "European civilizing." Most of his projects did not see the creation of Europeans as the desired outcome, but that of civilized Jews in civilized imperial and occasionally national places. The settlers in Argentina, for example, would soon fully embrace an Argentinian identity based on a myth of the Jewish gaucho. The formative text for the latter was supplied in 1910 by *Los gauchos judíos*, written by Alberto Gerchunoff, a son of the JCA. By 1910 Hirsch had been dead for fourteen years, yet the JCA and its legacy lived on and did so on increasingly national terms, offering Jews to become productive in new national contexts, be that in the nation-states of the Americas or, increasingly, in Palestine. Lehmann thus ultimately might be too modest. Rather than offering a story that only has relevance for a few decades late in the nineteenth century, the structures that Hirsch helped to establish, from railroads to settlements, long outlived him. *The Baron* is an important contribution not only to European Jewish history, but more generally to the debates about settler colonialism and European imperial and economic history.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Sarah Panter, *Jüdische Erfahrungen und Loyalitätskonflikte im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2014).

[2]. See also Mirjam Zadoff, *Next Year in Marienbad: The Lost Worlds of Jewish Spa Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[3]. Liora R. Halperin, *The Oldest Guard: Forging the Zionist Settler Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 10.

[4]. See, for example, Zvi Gitelman, "A Century of Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Legacy of the Bund and the Zionist Movement," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, ed. Zvi Gielman (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 3-19, here 3; Jack Jacobs, preface to *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100*, ed. Jack Jacobs (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), xi-xiv, here xi.

[5]. Peter Hertner, "The Balkan Railways, International Capital and Baling from the End of the Nineteenth Century until the Outbreak of the First World War," in *Finance and Modernization: A Transnational and Transcontinental Perspective for the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed.

Gerald D. Feldman and Peter Hertner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 125-54, here 138-41.

[6]. See, for example, Halperin, *The Oldest Guard*; Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (New York: Macmillan, 2020); Rachel Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial 'Turn': From Interpretation to Decolonization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 388-405; Patrick Wolfe, "New Jews for Old: Settler State formation and the Impossibility of Zionism: In Memory of Edward W. Said," *Arena Journal* 37/38 (2012): 285-321; and Ilan Pappé, "Zionism as Colonialism: A Comparative View of Diluted Colonialism in Asia and Africa," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (2008): 611-33.

Citation: Philipp Nielsen. Review of Lehmann, Matthias B., *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2023. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58362>

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