ANTISEMITISM


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Antisemitism is the active or passive, individual or collective, hatred of either empirically existing or purely mythological Jews, such that the signifier ‘Jew’ functions as a representational substitute for social conduct or institutions deemed by the antisemite to be abnormal and pathological. Especially important is the manner in which ‘the Jew’ stands in for excesses and deficiencies in social relations such that ‘Jews’ embody a simultaneous ‘too much’ and ‘not enough’ logic: e.g. Jews have been criticized for being simultaneously too egoistic and too altruistic or agents of both anomie and fatalism; in other words, ‘Jews’ personify social imbalances.

Antisemitism may manifest itself in religious, political-economic, ethnoracial, and cultural terms and is typically correlated positively with psychological authoritarianism and political models such as fascism, Nazism, right wing populism, nativism, and other movements that scapegoat a pernicious ‘other.’ It can find expression in reactions ranging from stereotypical insults at one end of the spectrum to all-out genocide at the other. More than routine bias or simple prejudice, antisemitism is a demonizing ideology that attempts to explain events, crises, inequalities, exploitation, and villainy by exposing the malevolent intentions of Jews as the primary, visible or invisible, causal factor. The ‘Jew’, in other words, becomes the master key to unlock the mysteries of all social problems and can therefore shade off into a freestanding worldview. In western political culture references to ‘the Jew’ are frequently veiled in populist
and fundamentalist currents with codes such as ‘European bankers’ or anti-Christian, international ‘money barons’ in order to preserve a veneer of respectability.

As a social problem antisemitism fluctuates in intensity, depending on changes in social organization and social dynamics. After the Holocaust, for example, antisemitism was inextricably associated with Nazism and, as such, was relegated to the fringes of society in the industrialized west and, by the 1960s, antisemitism was believed to be, if not nearly extinct, then definitely on the list of endangered ideological species in the United States. Since the mid-1990s, however, antisemitism appears to be making a comeback in the United States, especially among minority groups that, in previous generations, were relatively immune to the abstract demonization of Jews. Also, through the Internet, many hate groups have found a way to maximize their antisemitic diatribes. Globally, levels of antisemitism may be at an all-time high, especially in the Middle East where demonological antisemitism has reached hysterical proportions and Jews are fully identified with Israeli state policies. Any attempt to further explain antisemitism must, first, distinguish between concrete anti-Jewish bias and abstract demonization, and, secondly, between premodern and modern forms of antisemitism.

**Routine Bias and Demonization**

Garden-variety recriminations (“My Jewish landlord is cheap.”) fall short of true antisemitism. It would be unsurprising to learn, for example, that some landlords are in fact cheap and that some cheap landlords are Jews. Accusations of this concrete and specific nature frequently intersect with routine prejudice and racism. One way in which antisemitism and other forms of simple prejudice do coincide is in their essentializing constructions of the other, such that, keeping with the above example, ‘cheapness’ becomes identical with Jewishness itself – from
“This Jew is cheap” to “All Jews are cheap.” But antisemitism is not conceptually reducible to routine bias or prejudice. In simple racism or bigotry, we do not find paranoid fantasies pertaining to global domination, secret world governments, the hidden hand of global finance and international communism. Antisemitism is capable of embodying any and all accusations and moves toward its pure form the closer it comes to expressing purely otherworldly and abstract conceptions.

Distinguishing between abstract and concrete forms of anti-Jewish animosity is in keeping with the main currents of critical social scientific and historical analysis over the last few generations that treat ‘the Jew’ of antisemitic propaganda as a socially constructed object of hatred. Theodor W. Adorno, Maurice Samuel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Norman Cohn, Gavin Langmuir, David Norman Smith, and Stephen Wilson have all put forward authoritative, constructionist explanations that distinguish between concrete and demonological Judenhass. Abstract demonization came of age in medieval Europe and was primarily expressed in religious terms.

**Premodern and Modern Antisemitism**

Under the sway of Augustinian doctrines, European society conceived of itself as an organic whole, incorporated on the basis of God’s free gift of grace, and morally regulated through the Church. Those who did not recognize Christ’s claim, it was thought, may have been ‘evil’ but, in Augustine’s *Enchiridion*, evil represented only a wound or defect in the social body and, as such, was not substantively apart from good. This was important for Jews because, their not recognizing Christ’s charisma led to their portrayal as defective but still human. As defective aliens within the body of Christian society, Jews were nonetheless important for their political-
economic functions, especially as sources of loans, and for this reason they were subjects of alternating tolerance and persecution. The resulting arrangement between Jews and Christians was tense and often violent, yet nothing like wholesale genocide in the modern sense. This situation began to change as early as the first Crusade in the 11th century and accelerated as the 14th century approached. Medieval antisemitism evolved in conjunction with the Black Plague, as the Catholic Church transformed itself into a cult of death and Christians persecuted Jews for their expiatory value. The 14th century represented a decisive transformation in the way European antisemites thought about Jews: from defective humans to devils. This period also marked the beginning of what can be called a fully developed, abstract Christian antisemitism and ushered in the era of spasmodic genocide against Jews en masse that lasted for approximately 500 years.

Modern European antisemitism spoke French and German in the final quarter of the 19th century, but even though France delivered the spectacle of the Dreyfus Affair, French antisemitism was deeply contradictory and in many ways derivative. Perhaps one could make a similar assessment in the case of Russia, which contributed the pathetic Protocols of the Elders of Zion and a wave of pogroms, yet was riddled with deep internal contradictions and influenced by external sources. The French also lacked the deadly seriousness that marked the spirit of Judenhass that developed in Germany where the reactionary Wilhelm Marr purportedly coined the term antisemitism during a period of profound, turbulent modernization and economic convulsions, most dramatically represented by the crash of 1873.

A crucial development in the German variety was the shift from a religiously oriented hatred toward, on the one hand, a pseudo-scientific attack against Jews as an inferior racial category and, on the other, a class-based criticism of culture, capital, and liberalism. In short,
Jews were no longer just ‘Christ-killers’ or petty ‘loan sharks’ but also biologically inferior though cunning masters of modern economic institutions sucking the lifeblood out of the Fatherland through the treachery of compound interest, political corruption, domination of administrative units, and international intrigue. Jews had been identified with capitalism before, but with the ascendancy of finance capital and speculation mania in the 1870s, the criticism of capital acquired new elements that would prove crucial in the 20th century. The key was the conservative Catholic formulation of two distinct species of capital: good, productive, Christian capital on the one hand and rapacious, parasitic, Jewish finance capital on the other. This spurious compartmentalization of capital was of paramount importance in the development of modern antisemitic propaganda and arguably functions today as the dominant theme among antisemites and as the basis for world domination conspiracies.

The consequences of organized antisemitism were nowhere more catastrophic than in Nazi Germany, yet, the United States represents a more instructive sociological laboratory in the study of anti-Jewish hatred. In colonial times antisemitism was virtually unknown but successive waves of immigrants brought Old World prejudices as well. Antisemitism became an obvious social problem with the third wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. While elite snobbery existed, the greatest threat to Jews was posed by Catholic arrivals. During the Great Depression demagogues such as Father Coughlin harangued against Jews with a Euro-Catholic style of fascist propaganda, yet the message resonated best with older Catholic males with low levels of education, weak ties to the Church, and lacking the oft-noted conditioning called ‘Americanization.’
See also
Americanization; Ethnocentrism; Prejudice; Racism; Religion and Conflict.

Further Readings and References


