5.6: Modern Anti-Semitism

The great irony of feminism - or, rather, the need for feminism - was that women were not a “minority” but nevertheless faced prejudice, violence, and legal restrictions. European Jews, on the other hand, were a minority everywhere they lived. Furthermore, because of their long, difficult, and often violent history facing persecution from the Christian majority, Jews faced a particularly virulent and deep-seated form of hatred from their non-Jewish neighbors. That hatred, referred to as anti-Semitism (also spelled antisemitism), took on new characteristics in the modern era that, if anything, made it even more dangerous.

Jews had been part of European society since the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, Jews were frequently persecuted, expelled, or even massacred by the Christian majority around them. Jews were accused of responsibility for the death of Christ, were blamed for plagues and famines, and were even thought to practice black magic. Jews were unable to own land, to marry Christians, or to practice trades besides sharecropping, peddling goods, and lending money (since Christians were banned from lending money at interest until the late Middle Ages, the stereotypes of Jewish greed originated with the fact that money-lending was one of the only trades Jews could perform). Starting with the late period of the Enlightenment, however, some Jews were grudgingly "emancipated" legally, being allowed to move to Christian cities, own land, and practice professions they had been banned from in the past.

That legal emancipation was complete almost everywhere in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, although the most conservative states like Russia still maintained anti-Semitic restrictions. Anti-Jewish hatred, however, did not vanish. Instead, in the modern era, Jews were vilified for representing everything that was wrong with modernity itself. Jews were blamed for urbanization, for the death of traditional industries, for the evils of modern capitalism, but also for the threat of modern socialism, for being anti-union and for being pro-union, for both assimilating to the point that “regular” Germans and Frenchmen and Czechs could no longer tell who was Jewish, and for failing to assimilate to the point that they were “really” the same as everyone else. To modern anti-Semites, Jews were the scapegoat for all of the problems of the modern world itself.
At the same time, modern anti-Semitism was bound up with modern racial theories, including Darwinian evolutionary theory, its perverse offspring Social Darwinism, and the Eugenics movement which sought to purify the racial gene pool of Europe (and America). Many theorists came to believe that Jews were not just a group of people who traced their ancestry back to the ancient kingdom of Judah, but were in fact a “race,” a group defined first and foremost by their blood, their genes, and by supposedly inexorable and inherent characteristics and traits.

Between vilification for the ills of modernity and the newfound obsession with race that swept across European and American societies in the late nineteenth century, there was ample fuel for the rise of anti-Semitic politics. The term anti-Semitism itself was invented and popularized by German and Austrian politicians in the late nineteenth century – an Anti-Semitic League emerged in Germany in the 1870s under the leadership of a politician named Wilhelm Marr. Marr claimed that Jews had “without striking a blow” “become the socio-political dictator of Germany.” In fact, Jews were about 1% of the German population and, while well-represented in business and academia, they had negligible political influence. Following Marr’s efforts, other parties emerged over the course of the 1880s.

Parties whose major platform was anti-Semitism itself, however, faded from prominence in the 1890s. The largest single victory won by anti-Semitic political parties in the German Empire was in 1893, consisting of only 2.9% of the vote. Subsequently, however, mainstream right-wing parties adopted anti-Semitism as part of their platform. Thus, even though parties that defined themselves solely by anti-Semitism diminished, anti-republican, militaristic, and strongly Christian-identified parties on the political right in France, Austria, and Germany soon started using anti-Semitic language as part of their overall rhetoric.

Along with the new, racist, version of anti-Semitism, the modern conspiracy theory of global Jewish influence was a distinctly modern phenomenon. A Prussian pulp novelist named Hermann Goedsche published a novel in 1868 that included completely fictional meeting of a shadowy conspiracy of Rabbis who vowed to seize global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through Jewish control of world banking. That “Rabbi's Speech” was soon republished in various languages as if it had actually happened. Better known was the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a document claiming to be the minutes from a meeting of international Jewish leaders that copied whole sections Goedsche's “Speech” and combined them with various equally spurious accounts of Jewish political machinations. The Protocols were first published in 1903 by the Russian secret police as justification for continued anti-Semitic restrictions in the Russian Empire, and they subsequently became important after World War I when they were used as “proof” that the Jews had caused the war in order to disrupt the international political order.
Another iconic moment in the history of anti-Semitism occurred in France in the 1890s, when a French Jewish military officer named Alfred Dreyfus was framed for espionage, stripped of his rank, and imprisoned. An enormous public debate broke out in French society over Dreyfus's guilt or innocence which revolved around his identity as a French Jew. “Anti-Dreyfusards” argued that no Jew could truly be a Frenchman and that Dreyfus, as a Jew, was inherently predisposed to lie and cheat, while “Dreyfusards” argued that anyone could be a true, legitimate French citizen, Jews included.

In the end, the “Dreyfus Affair” culminated in Dreyfus’s exoneration and release, but not before anti-Semitism was elevated to one of the defining characteristics of anti-liberal, authoritarian right-wing politics in France. Some educated European Jews concluded that the pursuit of not just legal equality, but cultural acceptance was doomed given the strength and virulence of anti-Semitism in European culture, and they started a new political movement to establish a Jewish homeland in the historical region of ancient Israel. That movement, Zionism, saw a slow but growing migration of European Jews settling in the Levant, at the time still part of the Ottoman Empire. Decades later, it culminated in the emergence of the modern state of Israel in 1948.