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| Anti-Semitism including the Holocaust |
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| Anti-Semitism, a term coined in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, is the hatred of Jews and Jewishness, the latter being perceived in widely varying and contradictory ways. By the early twentieth century, Jewishness was associated negatively with capitalism as well as communism and an adherence to ancient, outmoded beliefs and keenness toward urban and modernist sensibilities. Purveyors of anti-Semitism drew caricatures of Jews to fit a variety of exclusionary agendas, casting blame on the minority group for upsetting Christian, nativist, and purist values in politics, nationalism, religion, or culture. Modernist artists who were prone to agree with arguments that foretold the decline of civilization drew on the figure of the Jew to embody a series of malaises, depicting Jews as unwanted, archetypal Others to Western cultural values. |
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Though anti-Semitism emerged largely in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anti-Judaism can be traced as far back as the invention of monotheism. The persecution of Jews has also been a recurrent event across Christian Europe, where Jews were alternately tolerated and tyrannized. With work and habitation restricted by feudal decrees, European Jews found themselves often corralled into villages or what became known as ghettos in urban enclaves. One profession open to Jews but forbidden to Christians was the loaning of money with interest, which gave Jews entrance into highly profitable banking, but created a perception that Jews were inherently usurers who cared only for money. In the twentieth century, the Great Depression was felt by some to be a crisis induced by Jewish bankers.  What marks anti-Semitism as novel in the modern era is the addition of theories of race that were cloaked in the language of biological science. Jews were said to be not just a people who held to Jewish religious beliefs but a race that could be discerned by blood and other biological characteristics including facial features. Developed from ideas taken from Darwin and other biologists and inconsistently displaced into cultural categories without any scientific basis, the discourse of race was applied by ‘Aryans’ as evidence of white superiority and the need to police blood lines and national identities that were seemingly endowed by heredity and soil. The Jewish body increasingly came to be seen as a threat to the purist integrity of the Aryan body.  In modernist art, anti-Semitism varies in degrees. It is common to find stereotypical depictions of Jews as animalistic and money-driven, with pronounced, ungainly bodily characteristics. It is less common to find outright violent condemnations of Jews, although there are chilling examples in articles by Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961) and in Ezra Pound’s wartime radio speeches. Negative typecasts of Jews appear in work by Henry James, T. S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and H. G. Wells. Of these writers, Eliot’s writing on Jews has received the most scrutiny, as several of his poems contain Jewish characters who are portrayed as lowly and subhuman. In ‘Gerontion,’ the speaker of the poem states: ‘My house is a decayed house, / And the jew squats on the window-sill, the owner, / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp’ (1963, 29). Eliot, who left the word ‘jew’ distinctly uncapitalized in other poems (often recapitalized by editors), casts the figure of the Jewish landlord here as ‘spawned,’ born in a bestial manner, and presiding over a dilapidated house like a slumlord. In another poem, ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar,’ Eliot puts Bleistein in the context of vermin: ‘The rats are underneath the piles. / The jew is underneath the lot’ (1963, 33). When later confronted with questions about his characterizations of Jews in his poetry, Eliot denied any anti-Semitic motivation. Yet in the same year that Hitler took power, Eliot would write in an essay that ‘reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable’ (1934, 20).  Eliot’s withering but fairly minor references to Jews can be compared to Pound’s much more blatant anti-Semitic rants that were a central platform of his intellectual worldview (see Doob). However, in post-World War II America, Eliot arguably had much more of an influence in setting the intellectual climate for American academics and writers, and thus his anti-Semitic writing had more staying power, while Pound was dismissed as insane by many.  Examples of anti-Semitism appear across the intellectual history of modernist culture. Nietzsche argued that Jews, although weak in body, used their mental cunning to overthrow the physically strong and institute laws to empower the feeble. After his death, the editorial interventions of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Nietzsche’s sister, stressed the anti-Semitic angle of his writings, though Nietzsche was also highly critical of the German state and at times suggested that Judaism played a more valued role in contributing to the history of abstract thinking. Some Jews themselves added fuel to the fire. Otto Weininger, an Austrian Jew, wrote an influential work *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Character*, 1903), in which he categorized Jews in his idiosyncratic language of psycho-biology as flaccid and effeminate. Sigmund Freud tells a joke à propos of Jewish self-hatred: one Jew, hearing another make a spiteful remark about the Jewish character, says, ‘your ant*e*semitism was well-known to me; your anti-semitism is new to me’ (33).  The Nazis claimed to detect a heavy influence of Jewish sensibility in modernist art and sought to condemn the whole lot as degenerate, *entartete Kunst*. A famous poster advertised a traveling *‘*degenerate art’ exhibition to encourage public excoriation of modernism with a prominent image of a black jazz musician wearing a Star of David. The Nazi movement brought to the most extreme violent levels a paranoid logic that saw Jews as both powerful and powerless, uncannily similar to Aryan Europeans who were desperate to deem them essentially different. With the determination to rid Europe and then the rest of the world of Jews, the Nazis shifted from state anti-Semitism, already in place in countries across Europe that had passed laws sequestering and restricting Jews, to physical removal and extermination.  After the Holocaust, tensions remained over significant levels of lingering anti-Semitic feeling. Immediately after the war, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *Réflexions sur la question juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*, 1946), in which he lambasted the French in particular for their continued prejudicial associations of Jews with money, biological difference, and incorrigible otherness, even as many Jews participated in the resistance. ‘If the Jew did not exist,’ Sartre wrote, ‘the anti-Semite would invent him’ (13).  Theodore Adorno, summing up the post-war devastation and trauma, declared that, ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (34). For Adorno, the Holocaust did not undermine but was consonant with Enlightenment traditions of rational control and national pride and therefore forever tainted the vaunted high cultural monuments of European modernity. Adorno would somewhat later retract this statement, perhaps thinking of concentration camp survivors and writers like Paul Celan. Primo Levi traversed the unthinkable by writing eloquently about his experience of the horror of Auschwitz itself. Levi, Celan, and other writers, artists, and thinkers marked by the Holocaust and anti-Semitism include Elie Wiesel, Elsa Morante, Emmanuel Lévinas, Claude Lanzmann, and Charlotte Delbo. Their work touched on the theme of how to write about something for which there are no words. This crisis at the heart of knowledge itself, the impossibility of signifying the traumatic core of the Real, then became a hallmark of post-structuralist philosophy in Europe in the latter half of the century. |
| Further reading:  (Adorno)  (Doob)  (Eliot)  (Eliot, After Strange Gods)  (Freud)  (Julius)  (Laqueur)  (Levi)  (Sartre)  (Weininger)  (Weisel) |