

Study Group Session 1: **The Connection Between Anti-Semitism and Capitalism**

"Great is study for it leads to action" (Kiddushin 40b)

December 13th, 2020

For this session we highly implore everyone to read the entirety of these articles as they're not too long. Still, for those who are understandably overwhelmed/busy, we included the most important excerpts for you to read to participate in the discussion. If you don't have time for that either, we will have a brief teach-back before our discussion.

Readings:

"To Defeat Anti-semitism, We Must Defeat Capitalism" by Aaron Freedman (Published in January 2020):

<https://jacobinmag.com/2020/01/antisemitism-capitalism-new-york-attacks>

"Socialism Defeats Anti-semitism" by Eric Hass pages 15-16, 25-30 (Published in 1946):

<https://www.marxists.org/subject/jewish/hass-anti-semitism.pdf>

Essential Excerpts to Read From Aaron Freedman Article:

Precapitalist Antisemitism

"Antisemitism — a system of control and oppression that involves more than mere personal prejudice — predates capitalism. Its roots in the United States, by way of Europe, come from Christian discrimination against "Christ killers," dating as far back as the [2nd century CE](#). Over the course of the Middle Ages, Christian rulers institutionalized this prejudice into legal restrictions on where Jews could live, what jobs they could work, and even what clothes they could wear.

Contrary to popular perceptions today, precapitalist antisemitism was always about material conflict as much as ignorant superstition. Under feudalism, Jews largely occupied the merchant/trader class, in between the ruling kings and nobility (Jews were barred from land ownership) and the peasant majority. While the lord of the manor was often seen as a distant, benevolent source of charity — bound as they were, however minutely, by church-mandated poverty relief — the Jew's far less oppressive, petty bourgeois profit-seeking could feel closer and more offensive. Moneylending in particular became associated with Jews — most famously, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* — thanks to usury bans that prevented Christians from charging interest.

As a religious other, outside the powerful guilds of Christian tradesmen and artisans and without recourse to church charity, Jews were also very vulnerable. During times of

crisis — war, famine, plague — violent antisemitic attacks would spike. Some of the worst pogroms of the Middle Ages occurred during the wartime upheaval of the First Crusade and [in response to the Black Death](#) (which allegedly affected Jews less, ostensibly due to ghetto quarantines or ritual washing). Though certain individual Jews could, during good times, reach positions of limited power and influence — the so-called “court Jews” — the first sign of crisis would elicit scapegoating by the ruling elite and attacks by the peasant masses.”

While “many oppressions rely on keeping a targeted group of people poor, uneducated, designated nonwhite, or otherwise ‘at the bottom,’” as left activist April Rosenblum wrote in [“The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere,”](#) her influential 2007 survey of antisemitism, **“the point of anti-Jewish oppression is to keep a Jewish face in front, so that Jews, instead of ruling classes, become the target for peoples’ rage.”**

The Socialism of Fools

“Socialists of the day understood **the danger of working-class antisemitism**: it was the German Social Democrats who circulated the saying that **“antisemitism is the socialism of fools.”** Yet Jew hatred would prove a durable weapon for the capitalist class, deployed as predictably as the state police during times of trouble. It was no coincidence that one of Russia’s deadliest pogroms — which killed 100 Jews in Kiev in 1905 — took place amid an empire-wide social revolution, in which the reactionary elite was desperate to prove that [“all Russia’s troubles stemmed from the machinations of the Jews and socialists.”](#) When nationalism and imperialism were added to the mix, antisemitism reached new heights of murderous capacity, with the Holocaust — perpetrated not only by the Nazis but conservative regimes across Europe — as its horrific zenith.

Crossing over the Atlantic Ocean, antisemitism would continue to fester in the United States. In response to the arrival of large numbers of working-class Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, industrialist Henry Ford became one of the country’s leading anti-Jewish propagandists. From the pages of his personal newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, Ford — by 1920, the richest man in America — published a series of conspiracies that were later separately printed as [“The International Jew.”](#) Ford’s articles blamed the ills of capitalism on Jews (“Jewish Power and America’s Money Famine,” “How Jews Gained American Liquor Control”) while seeking to stoke an alliance between Christian workers and their anti-Bolshevik bosses (“Jewish Hot-Beds of Bolshevism in the U.S.”).

Then and now, wealthy, right-wing elites — organized in groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the anticommunist John Birch Society, whose members included oil tycoon H.L. Hunt and industrialist Fred Koch — have been the main drivers of antisemitism. **The**

targeting of Jewish leftists, in order to divide and weaken the working class, was a central feature of the Palmer and McCarthy Red Scares, sometimes called America's pogroms. When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953, the message was the same as the Pittsburgh shooter's: this is what happens to Jews who don't keep their heads down and toe the line."

Fighting Anti-Semitism Through Socialism

The foul stench of antisemitism lingers in the air of capitalist society because it is cruelly rational: **as long as there are capitalists, they will need groups to blame for their oppression. The only way to defeat antisemitism, then, is to win socialism.**

. . . the democratic socialism that we are fighting for is **not about merely swapping one class of antisemites with another. It's about doing away entirely with a ruling class** — by democratizing politics, society, and economy. Socialism may not mean the end of individual prejudice (though it is a start), but by removing the material basis for antisemitism, it will make it easier to wipe out interpersonal bigotry as well.

Discussion Questions on Freedman article:

- What is your initial reaction to this article?
- How did you experience antisemitism in your life? Can you see the economic bases of it?
- Do you think that the history of antisemitism has been solely centered around the Holocaust? What was your personal experience learning about antisemitism?
- What do you make of the relationship between anti-semitism and capitalism?
- What is your reaction to the phrase "socialism of fools"?
- The Jacobin article discusses the history of Jews under feudalism being targeted as "the proximate, visible face of capitalism" because the landowners they worked for were more distant from the peasant population. How has this phenomenon developed? How does it manifest itself in modern day events/issues?

Essential Excerpts to Read From Eric Hass Article:

Immigrants as Scapegoats Pg 15-16

American capitalism welcomed this influx of exploitable labor. Its agents encouraged and assisted in organizing the immigration. But this did not prevent the capitalists themselves from inciting Jew-hatred among native-born American workers. Experienced in the use of racial hostility as a goad and of immigrants as scapegoats, they **encouraged the plausible but fallacious assumption that the native workers'**

plight-low wages, unemployment, reduced living standards-was due to immigration and the competition in the labor market of the newcomers.

At various times the Swedes, Italians, Germans and Irish had been the targets of this class-inspired racial animosity. With each wave of immigration the newcomers were blamed "for taking American workers' jobs" - the American workers frequently being those who had arrived with the previous influx and who were themselves, the objects of earlier incitations.

But where the Swedes, Italians, etc., were assimilated in the American melting pot, and gradually lost their "racial" identity, the Jews remained "Jews." Long after the stock charges leveled against immigrants that they lived in overcrowded, disease-breeding tenements and brought down wage standards-ceased to apply (except insofar as Jewish workers shared with other workers these capitalist-imposed conditions), the Jews were looked upon as "strangers." Unlike other . **scapegoats of class rule**, they were to serve again and again in that unhappy role.

Antisemitism -- Instrument of Foreign Policy Pg. 25- 30

"What is it in the capitalist social soil that nourishes the anti-Semitic seed? It is conflict, conflict between capitalist nations, conflict between classes, conflict within classes. The capitalist system is one in which an owning class monopolizes' natural and social opportunities; in which the privately owned means of wealth production are used to exploit a propertyless working class; in which the exploiters themselves engage in perpetual competitive warfare with each other, nationally and individually. Thus capitalist society presents the aspect of a jungle of wild beasts, in which the "fittest" terrorize the less "fit," as De Leon expressed it. **and these in turn imitate among themselves the "fit" qualities of the biggest brute.** "The raw-boned struggle' is there," wrote De Leon. "It is inevitable. It is a shadow cast by the angles of fact of the capitalist system."

"But it was German capitalism which developed anti-semitism into a more formidable and far-reaching instrument of foreign policy than any other national capitalist group. And it is significant to note here that by utilizing this infernal policy to establish a bond with fascist and imperialist elements in Latin and Balkan nations, Nazi anti-Semitism did not disturb the cozy relations existing between the German plunderbund and its Anglo-American class colleagues. The workers should not soon forget that Anglo-American capitalism showed every disposition to shut its eyes to the Nazi anti-Semitic terror-if only German capitalism would relax its aggressive commercial policies. " nor would the world have failed to acclaim Hitler as a great German if he had known where to stop," Sir Nevile Henderson, British Ambassador to Berlin, wrote in

"Failure of a Mission," "even, for instance, after Munich and the Nuremberg decrees for the Jews."

Discussion Questions on Hass Article:

- Do you feel it is a Jewish imperative to fight for economic justice? Racial justice? How so?
- What do you make of the relationship between racism and anti-semitism?
- How does this discussion relate to this moment, our current organizing?
- How are anti-capitalist and anti-racist organizing related?