

Understanding Antisemitism: Historical Roots and Contemporary Relevance

Institute for Social Ecology Online Seminar

Day/Time: Tuesdays 4-5:30 pm ET, November 12-December 10
Instructors: Dr. Peter Staudenmaier (Marquette University, History),
Dr. Robert Ogman (Sociology, De Montfort University)

Course Description: Among the forms of exclusion and domination that have plagued human societies since the rise of capitalism, antisemitism has played a particularly destructive role. Beginning with the emergence of modern antisemitism in nineteenth century Europe, this seminar will examine the development of antisemitic beliefs across a variety of cultural contexts and explore the social function of anti-Jewish sentiment under hierarchical conditions. We will discuss how and why antisemitic thinking and practice, from covert animosity to outright violence, affect both the established institutions of the social order and oppositional movements working against these institutions. The thematic units include: Antisemitism: A Historical and Conceptual Introduction, A Critical Theory of Antisemitism, Antisemitism and Capitalism, Antisemitism and the Contemporary Left: Antizionism and Intersectionality, Contemporary Right Antisemitism.

Course format: The course format is a participatory seminar comprising five sessions. Each session begins with a short introduction of the texts and central issues by the instructors, followed by facilitated discussions among participants via Zoom video meeting. Participants are expected to complete the readings in advance of each seminar. We provide all required texts, available for download via the PowerSchool Learning course portal. There are no written assignments or grades; all participants receive a certificate of course completion.

November 12 Antisemitism: A Historical and Conceptual Introduction

The course will begin with a discussion of the range of meanings associated with the term ‘antisemitism’ and an inquiry into the historical origins of this tenacious social phenomenon. We will examine the emergence of modern forms of antisemitism in nineteenth century Europe and take a critical look at several prominent attempts to explain the historical rise and persistence of antisemitism.

Reading: Shulamit Volkov, “Antisemitism as a Cultural Code”

November 19 A Critical Theory of Antisemitism

Through a close reading of a seminal text on “the limits of Enlightenment,” we will explore the religious, economic, psychological, political, and philosophical roots of

European antisemitism, examining these factors against the background of contemporary historical accounts of the relationship between the Enlightenment and antisemitic thought as well as the relationship between capitalism and antisemitic practice.

Reading: Horkheimer and Adorno, “Elements of Antisemitism”

November 26 Antisemitism and Capitalism

Continuing our investigation into the historical development of antisemitic movements and ideas and the concomitant development of critiques of antisemitism, we will consider the ways in which social understanding of the meaning of antisemitism shifted in the wake of the genocide of European Jewry. We will attempt to broaden our analysis by reflecting on the underlying function of antisemitic attitudes within a hierarchical and heteronomous society, and assess the possible relevance of various forms of ‘secondary antisemitism’.

Reading: Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism”

December 3 Antisemitism and the Contemporary Left: Antizionism and Intersectionality

Starting from the premise that antisemitic archetypes have played a constitutive role in several of the most powerful authoritarian systems that blighted the twentieth century, we will continue our inquiry by scrutinizing the simultaneous persistence of antisemitic assumptions and images within some sectors of the radical milieu over the past century and a half. We will critically appraise the recent discourse on a ‘new antisemitism’ and its relevance to anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics.

Reading: Moishe Postone, “History and Helplessness”

December 10 Contemporary Right Antisemitism

This session focuses on the role of antisemitism within contemporary far-right and white nationalist movements. We will discuss the relationship between racism and antisemitism within these movements as intertwined yet also distinct forms of oppression.

Readings: Eric Ward, *Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism.*”

Ruth Wodak, “The Radical Right and Antisemitism.”