Chapter 3: Antisemitism and Market Phobia

Eric Gans

What is most paradoxical about antisemitism is that the ancient hostility to Jews in the Christian and Muslim worlds is easier for us to understand than the virulent modern form that played so huge and horrible a role in European politics between 1879 (the first attestation of the word itself) and 1945. That a small and relatively powerless fraction of the population could become the obsessive focus of major political movements cannot be explained by either traditional suspicions or a universal need for scapegoats.

My explanation for this anomaly is that modern antisemitism coincides with the rise of the mature market system and was the means through which the tensions of this singular historical moment, tensions of whose importance not even Karl Marx was fully aware, came to be expressed and discharged. Human life may be filled with problems, but it is the problems of human interaction that the most fundamental mechanisms of human culture are designed to solve. Just as explaining the origin of religion by “primitive man’s awe” of natural phenomena misunderstands the critical danger to humanity posed by its own potential for mimetic violence, so the explanation of antisemitism as a generalized panacea for social ills neglects the chief potential source of mimetic violence at the time of its emergence.

The originary scene of culture responds to the need to defer the violence generated by mimetic rivalry for a central object. The scene of antisemitism answers a new version of this need, driven by the dominant form of human interaction in the late nineteenth century: the emerging modern market system. The difference between the old occasional anti-Judaism and the new obsessive antisemitism reflects the shift from a set of punctual disasters, typified by the Black Plague of 1348, to the ongoing problem posed by the modern free market. In the first case, the Jews were conceived as diabolical subverters of the Chris-
Christian world order; in the second, the Jews were seen as the masters of a diabolical *new* order that held sway over the captive nations of Christianity.

Marx, the earliest and greatest theoretician *cum* practitioner of modern antisemitism, makes this association clear in his early pamphlet *On the Jewish Question*, an 1844 “review article” of a book by the same name by the Young Hegelian Bruno Bauer (we will return to this material at greater length in Chapter 7):

The Jew has emancipated himself in the Jewish fashion not only by acquiring money power but through money’s having become (with him or without him) the world power and the Jewish spirit’s having become the practical spirit of the Christian peoples. The Jews have emancipated themselves to the extent that Christians have become Jews.

Money is the zealous one God of Israel, beside which no other God may stand. Money degrades all the gods of mankind and turns them into commodities…. Money is the essence of man’s life and work, which have become alienated from him. This alien monster rules him and he worships it.

The God of the Jews has become secularized and is now a worldly God. The bill of exchange is the Jew’s real God.

Jewry reaches its peak with the perfection of bourgeois society, but bourgeois society reaches perfection only in the Christian world. Only under the rule of Christianity, which externalizes all human relationships … could bourgeois society isolate itself entirely from the life of the state, destroy all those bonds that link man as a species, replace them with egotism and the demands of private interest.…

Christianity sprang from Judaism; it has now dissolved itself back into Judaism….

Christianity is the sublime thought of Judaism. Judaism is the everyday practical application of Christianity. But this application could become universal only after Christianity had been theoretically perfected as the religion of self-alienation of man, from himself and from nature.

Only then could Jewry become universally dominant and turn alienated man and alienated nature into alienable, salable objects, subject to the serfdom of egotistical needs and to usury.

The social emancipation of Jewry is the emancipation of society from Jewry. (Marx 1959)

The Jew, in Marx’s terms, converts Christendom to his “religion,” the market system. Marx’s neo-Hegelian analysis of the Judeo-Christian dialectic is not without subtlety. The triumph of “Judaism” is only possible after the prior triumph of “Christianity”: the creation of the modern market as a generalized system of exchange is only possible once worldly goods could be conceived of as alienated from the essence of the individual agent. (Marx conceives this alienation as an illusory substitution of the abstract soul for the material body rather than as the Christian affirmation of the primacy of the ethical over the