Chapter Five

Political and Social Dimensions of Worker Antisemitism

The Institute identified three areas of worker hostility toward Jews broadly conceived as social and political factors: power, education, and perceived lack of war effort. The belief that Jews were disproportionately commanding more than their fair share of power or that they were “pulling the strings” somehow was shared by 13.3 percent of the sample. For some workers, Jews were synonymous with “global power” – that they controlled society though mythical powers peculiar only to Jews. For most, however, power was exercised in specific domains and in more mundane forms, especially the realms of business, national politics, and the functions of state and local governments.

Power

The everyday worker understanding of ‘power’ had, as Gurland pointed out, a “wide range” (AL: 232). Power was distributed everywhere in society but unevenly. Jews were drawn to power and lusted after it just as they were drawn toward and lusted after money. Jews became the symbol of all that was wrong with power, the excess and concentration of power, and the illegitimate exercise of it.
Charges preferred against Jews because of undue control they are said to have seized or to be aspiring to are mostly characterized by inarticulateness and vagueness. They belong to the realm of myth. Jews are pictured as exercising or coveting tremendous power within society – either through control of economic life or in addition to the latter.

Hostile or critical statements in this field claim that Jews run the world, or the country, or the country’s government, or that they try to do so; that they have too much power; that they control public opinion, communications, amusement industries; that they are a destructive element which ruins the country or the world; that they have infiltrated the administration of countries, states, cities; that they strive for power through clandestine manipulation, through political radicalism, etc. (AL: 194–95).

The antisemitic critique of Jewish power, then, stood as an attack on domination of a specific form: where the ‘Jew’ had usurped power that ‘should’ be entrusted to a traditional power-holder and legitimate form. In other words, the ‘Jew’ in charge had illegitimately assumed the social form of power. Having a boss was not a problem; a ‘Jew’ representing that power was a problem. But that was nearly the limit of identifying Jews with power. American workers were less likely to fall for the notion of Jewish global conspiracy (e.g., Coughlinism) as their European counterparts but an element of cosmological mysticism was evident in the interview material. At its most abstract, the antisemitic idea of Jewish power posited an all-powerful cabal of Jews dominating all worldly affairs. Gurland wrote “In statements made by our interviewees, references to Jews as ruling, controlling and shaping the destinies of the world are less widespread and less conspicuous than they were at any time in any European sphere of Nazi influence. Still, the ideas

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1 “An Irish waiter in an industrial town in Pennsylvania, AFL-member of long standing, believes in a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. This conspiracy is so manifest that he can watch it operate. Like a genuine mystery fan he relates how he succeeded in overhearing what was said at a Zionist meeting in a hotel room where he had to wait upon those attending. He records: ‘The speaker began to tell how the Jews were better than the Gentiles and how they would get control of things.’ This man sincerely believes to have heard what he relates. To him this is factual foundation enough to assume that a universal conspiracy is plotted by the Jews. What underlies his nightmarish fear of the Jewish world plot is not, however, his own conviction and experience. He has listened to Father Coughlin and accepted a good deal of Coughlinite ideas” (AL: 233–34).