Popular Anti-Semitism

MICHAEL R. MARRUS

Popular anti-Semitism permeated the atmosphere of the Dreyfus Affair. It wormed its way into the culture of daily life, affecting events at every moment. But this anti-Semitism cannot be understood in isolation from other important historical developments. That anti-Jewish feeling in France had grown so strong and pervasive was part of the extraordinary politicization that occurred in the western world during the course of the nineteenth century. Politicization meant the commitment of ever greater numbers of people to particular causes of national or universal relevance, causes hitherto championed only by social or academic elites. Politicization also entailed an increasing tendency to couch such issues in a popular idiom and the ritualistic celebration of ideological positions before great masses of people. Finally, politicization involved new forms of political expression: mass-circulation newspapers, posters, popular parties and leagues, and political rallies.

It was not until the 1880s that hardened anti-Semites in France discovered that fear and hatred of Jews could have a broad popular appeal. Before that time, anti-Jewish writers had attracted relatively little attention, and they did not normally connect with serious political issues of the day. These writers came chiefly from the socialist Left, those who since the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era had envisioned a new society free of the exploitation and social inequities associated with the liberal bourgeois order. Because Jews appeared to them to be the chief beneficiaries of the social arrangements they decried, such authors took to excoriating Jews as a group. As Jews were beginning to find their way in early nineteenth-century French society—and as some, such as the Rothschilds, achieved quite spectacular successes—people who looked back to a communalistic society or a preindustrial mode of production often considered Jews their enemies. Such were the views of some famous early socialists in France—men like Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Pierre Leroux. As regards anti-Semitism the most important was Alphonse Toussenel, a journalist and follower of Fourier whose first book had the inflammatory title Les Juifs, rois de l'époque (The Jews, Kings of the Era) (1845).

In retrospect, these left-wing thinkers appear to us as cranky individualists, fundamentally unlike the mass propagandists who emerged later, in the decade before Dreyfus. Toussenel, for example, while yielding to none in the intensity of his anti-Jewish views, nevertheless did not devote his career to disseminating the message. He retreated to the countryside in disillusionment after the failure of the Revolution of 1848, and lived his life as a country gentleman—hunting, and writing books on birds and animal life. To be sure, spokesmen such as Toussenel left behind them a legacy of ideas and images, replete with references to “high finance,” the Rothschilds, and the Jewish propensity for capitalist exploitation. Like other elaborate...
assaults upon capitalism, however, these notions failed to win adherents beyond a small coterie of intellectuals.

Popular anti-Semitism persisted in the eastern part of France, in the old Jewish population centers of Alsace and Lorraine, but such sentiment was guided more by traditional leaders of opinion, often local rural notables rather than by the modern urban rabble-rousers. In villages around Strasbourg, Metz, and Colmar, Jewish peddlers, wholesalers, and moneylenders continued to ply their trades until well into the nineteenth century. Hard times—or political upheaval, as in 1848—could bring to the surface a variety of ancient complaints rooted in custom and folklore. But this kind of disturbance occurred seldom after the middle of the century and was clearly on the decline as its social basis continued to erode. With the progressive integration of Jews into regional society, and with the gradual introduction of new institutions to perform traditionally "Jewish" functions, the old resentments against the Jews gradually subsided.

In 1882 the spectacular collapse of a Catholic banking house, the Union générale, sent anti-Jewish shock waves throughout France. While the old-style hostility was eroding, an event like the bank collapse catalyzed the development of a modern anti-Semitic ideology: an entire system of ideas that ascribed important disasters to Jews while proposing solutions to their supposed "domination" of French society. The Union générale bank had been founded by Catholics specifically in order to break the hold of Jewish and Protestant families over the banking industry; it attracted deposits from Church institutions, distinguished Catholic families, and tens of thousands of small investors. When the crash occurred, owing in reality to severe mismanagement, press accounts sympathetic to the bank attributed the ruin to the evil machinations of Jews—particularly the Rothschilds—who were pictured as leading an assault on French national interests. "Killed by the Jews," was the brief epitaph on the Union générale written by the French ambassador to St. Petersburg, the Viscount de Vogüé; a chorus of similar charges echoed across the country, led by Eugène Bontoux, a former Rothschild employee and director of the newly defunct Catholic bank. The result was scandal: a carefully orchestrated horror story played out in mass-circulation newspapers before a huge public hungry precisely for sensational melodrama of this kind. Across France, people were duly scandalized; for many decades, people remembered the Union générale crash and saw in it a prime demonstration that when the world was not right, a Jew was likely responsible.

Ten years later, in 1892, came another such scandal: the bankruptcy of the Panama Canal Company, which had been formed originally by the creator of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps. In the lurid light cast by the press upon the company's shady dealings, the most grotesque caricatures that emerged concerned two Jews, Baron Jacques de Reinach, who committed suicide in the course of the affair, and Cornelius Herz. Here was another opportunity to defame Jews before the entire nation.

"Every regime," writes Jeanne Verdès-Le-Roux, "has the scandals it deserves." In the Third Republic, relatively weak and irresolute governments presided over a sharply divided populace, eager to believe the worst about those in financial or political power. To this was added the availability of anti-Semitic myths about Jewish financial manipulation, which could explain complex, extremely obscure financial intrigues.

No one took better advantage of these scandals than Édouard Drumont, a shy, brooding publicist of genius, who became the most outstanding purveyor of anti-Semitism in French history. Drumont was both Catholic and republican; by no means conservative politically, he was a man with a sharp eye for what would sell. In the wake of the Union générale crash he wrote a sensational two-volume work titled La France juive (Jewish France) (1886), reading into the long course of history a seemingly endless struggle between "Aryans" and "Semites." At the bottom of France's problems, which were accumulating perceptibly with the economic recession of the 1880s, was a scheming, predatory Jewish race. His work was a stunning success; it sold over a hundred thousand copies by the end of the first year and became the most widely read book in France. Thereafter Drumont's tract had continued to enjoy a long, vigorous life: In subsequent editions it was abridged, illustrated, reissued, expanded, and translated. Around Drumont emerged a whole cluster of anti-Semitic writers, who made the Jews the chief scapegoat for the ills of France. According to the historian of French
anti-Semitism Robert Byrnes, “literature attacking the Jews rose from an annual average of less than one publication from 1879 through 1885, to fifteen in 1886, fourteen in 1887, nine in 1888, and twenty in 1889. Attacks upon the Masons, conversely, fell from an annual average of nine from 1879 through 1886 to six in 1887, five in 1888, and one in 1889.”

Six years after releasing his bestseller and just in time to capitalize on the Panama scandal, Drumont launched La Libre parole, a daily newspaper devoted to anti-Semitism. Once again his journalistic instincts proved sound: The paper floated on a tide of anti-Jewish feeling and had reached the unusually high circulation of 200,000 by the time Alfred Dreyfus was arrested.

With Drumont and his paper, along with the other anti-Jewish pamphlets, books, and articles that had been appearing since the mid-1880s, we see the creation of a popular anti-Semitic genre. But why at this particular moment in French history? Economic difficulties beginning in the 1880s provide one plausible explanation. Another is undoubtedly the arrival on the scene of mass-circulation newspapers. Cheap popular dailies, read by hundreds of thousands and distributed throughout France on the newly built railway network added a new dimension to popular culture in the 1880s. Reveling in the sensational, stoking and feeding a popular hunger for novelty, these journals carried an anti-Semitic message to every corner of the land, awakening slumbering prejudices and inciting new fears of obscure forms of Jewish domination. Without press controversy and the wide circulation of stories related to his book, Drumont might never have achieved fame and notoriety with his France juive. And without the cynicism of journalists encouraged by the surprising popular response to such demagoguery, it seems unlikely that there would have been so many effective champions of modern anti-Semitic fantasies. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, according to Zeev Sternhell, the great majority of popular newspapers were anti-Semitic.

Journalists, not social theorists, spread the new anti-Jewish mythology.

To tap the current of anti-Semitic sentiment, activists attempted to build specifically anti-Jewish political movements. The first was the Ligue nationale antisémite de France, organized in 1889 by a disparate group financed largely by a free-booting ex-officer and adventurer, the Marquis de Morès, a rancher in North Dakota and failed railway promoter in Indochina. De Morès and his followers were typical of anti-Semitic tendencies in the 1880s in being associated with Boulangism, a radical, plebiscitarian challenge to both organized socialism and the Republic. Its partisans rallied around the popular general and would-be dictator General Georges Boulanger.

Popular anti-Semitism could be allied with other causes besides Boulangism. In 1897 Jules Guérin, a disciple of both Morès and Drumont, began the Ligue antisémite française, which eventually attracted thousands of members. While its heritage was Boulangist, its tendency was distinctly leftist and radical; its members proclaimed themselves “socialists,” denouncing cosmopolitan speculators, department stores, and miscellaneous exploiters of the common person. The Ligue or-
organized demonstrations, many of them violent, and achieved some success in the Paris municipal elections of 1900.

Throughout France in the 1890s, organizers like Morès and Guérin embarked on anti-Semitism as a political career. The movement provided politicians like these with money, popular standing, and a degree of authority. The French in Algeria proved particularly susceptible to energetic revolutionary demagogues. Among the settler population, Jews were often seen as the supporters of a liberal and more centralized rule from Paris. Within radical and strongly nationalist circles, which were often bitterly opposed to the central government, opposition to Jews was woven into the fabric of local politics by the end of the century. The great anti-Semitic tribune in North Africa during the Dreyfus years was a naturalized Italian named Max Régis, whose anti-Jewish effusions sometimes made those of Drumont and Guérin look mild by comparison. His followers would march through the streets of Algiers, sometimes singing an anthem, the *Marche antisionôte*:

A mort les juifs! A mort les juifs!
Il faut les pendre
Sans plus attendre.
A mort les juifs! A mort les juifs!
Il faut les pendre
Par leur pif!

Death to the Jews! Death to the Jews!
They must be hung
Without delay.
Death to the Jews! Death to the Juifs!
They must be hung
By their snouts!

In April 1898, at the height of the Dreyfus Affair, Drumont drew upon Régis’s help and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies from Algiers. Later that year the French citizens of that city elected a new mayor: Max Régis.

Anti-Semitism clothed the ideals and aspirations of these agitators, lending form and apparent theoretical consistency to their diverse views. But the underlying reason for its success remains to be explained. Why did anti-Semitic mythology prove so popular? Behind it all, historians have suggested, lay a fundamental and widely felt enmity toward a world of change, a deep-seated anxiety and unhappiness in the face of a variety of forces
that were transforming French society. Anti-Semitism, in this view, had little to do with actual flesh-and-blood Jews; rather it was simply available as one of the most convenient and successful vehicles to oppose the dramatic new directions society was taking. The chorus of opposition sounded three broad predominant themes, each of which contributed its own mythical image of the Jew.

The first of these was the *cri de cœur* of the petit bourgeois—small shopkeepers, artisans, employees, and others for whom the growth in France of large-scale economic organization and the emergence of modern economic relationships seemed profoundly unjust. Many saw anti-Semitism as a way of protesting new inequities, which seemed such a shocking aspect of modern life. This anti-Semitism was populist, and its corresponding image of the Jew depicted a capitalist exploiter, linked to an international network of finance that was somehow seizing control of the fortunes of ordinary hard-working Frenchmen. In his *Testament d’un antisémite*, Drumont presented himself to the public as a defender of the poor and oppressed, a prophet of social justice. The anti-Semitic revolution for which he called would be an uprising of the downtrodden against the wealthy: "[T]he days of cosmopolitan high finance are numbered. Thanks to us, the names of the plutocrats who incarnate an avaricious and scheming Jewry are imprinted on the minds of the masses so that nothing can erase them."

These "masses" were the "people" of Michelet, rather than the proletariat of Karl Marx. They represented a vast brotherhood of Frenchmen united only by their misery and alienation—all of which could be blamed on the Jews. One day, Drumont wrote,

A man of the people will take up our campaign, a socialist leader who will refuse to be bought off by the Synagogue, as have been so many of his comrades; he will gather around him thousands of aroused persons, instructed by ourselves, those exploited people of all classes, small businessmen ruined by large department stores, those urban and rural workers crushed under the monopolies.

Here was a socialism for all classes, a political movement that did not require commitment to a class struggle in France. It was a socialism that
dispensed with the elaborate theoretical baggage of the Left, seeing the enemy plain and undisguised. It was not a limited appeal to those who would identify with a workers' party, rather it was a call to the entire body of honest Frenchmen, who might feel themselves to be victimized by Jewish outsiders.

This "socialist" anti-Semitism had its origins in Boulangism, the enthusiastic popular mobilization of 1886-1889. But after the demise of that movement it persisted in a variety of political contexts, even within the established socialist parties. It is useful to realize how loose and adaptable were the terminology and ideology of popular politics a century ago. "Socialist," "nationalist," "anti-Semitic"—these denoted only broad affiliations, not carefully worked-out doctrines. Denunciations of "Jews" could be considered on the Left simply as a linguistic shorthand for populist leanings. Jean Jaurès, the revered Socialist party chief and eventual defender of the Dreyfusards, stooped himself to taking occasional swipes at Jews, while at the same time denouncing Drumont as a false socialist. For Jaurès, as for many others, "Jew" was a crude, shorthand way of saying "bourgeois"; until the height of the Dreyfus Affair in 1898, "anti-Semitism" was certainly not seen in such quarters as a serious menace to individuals or as a form of prejudice against a group.

A second anti-Semitic theme bore the stamp of popular Catholicism, itself a part of the late nineteenth-century politicization I have discussed in this essay. This form of anti-Semitism depicted Jews as the great challenge to the Church and the faithful; it rehearsed old charges against the Jews as a decidal people, whose energies were now directed at the undermining of Christianity in France. The themes were old, and generations of Christian teachings regarding the Jews facilitated their acceptance. What was new was the extraordinarily wide distribution of such ideas at the end of the nineteenth century, and the widely respected authority the Church gave to the denunciation of Jews.

Often considered a period of secularization and dechristianization, the last decades of the nineteenth century nevertheless also witnessed a marked intensification of fervor in certain Catholic milieux, and even a popular religious revival associated with pilgrimages, the cult of the Sacré-Cœur, and ultramontanism, the movement with-

Figure 6, Cat. 72
Léon-Adolphe Willette
Anti-Semitic Candidate, 1889
Lithographic poster
in the Church that was zealously supportive of papal authority. Modern means of transport and communication carried the new messages of commitment. Those who have studied this energizing of popular religion have detected a powerful current of anti-Semitism among the various new articles of belief. Verdes-Leroux, for example, examined diocesan bulletins, a form of Church communication becoming considerably more significant during the period than ever before. Of seventy-five of those issued during the year of the Panama scandal that were examined, only fifteen were not hostile to Jews. Nineteen went to extreme lengths—accusing Jews of ritual murders or describing the invasion of France by a predatory horde of Jews.4

One of the most modern newspapers in France from a technical standpoint, La Croix, the journal of the Assumptionist Order, reached a huge audience during the Dreyfus era, and mixed lurid anti-Semitism with other themes of interest to the Catholic laity and clergy. According to La Croix the Jews had virtually taken over the Republic, and they had invented socialism, anticlericalism, and materialism to further their godless aims. Both violent and racist, the paper left to the imagination no wrongdoing on the part of Jews. Every incident was linked to the purported conspiracy of Jews to subvert Christianity and French society.

This anti-Semitism provided a means for Catholics to legitimize their position in French society, which was severely challenged by anticlerical activists in the 1880s. Anti-Semitism was also a way of establishing the social relevance of Catholic teaching and belief. Some Catholic publicists found in its rhetoric a means to proclaim the socially progressive character of their religiosity, borrowing from the populist or "socialist" anti-Semitism. Catholics who would exorcise the Jews before a mass audience were often people who were nervously defensive—they felt their world engulfed by alien forces and saw themselves as the innocent victims of modernity. In the end, as Pierre Sorlin points out in his remarkable monograph on La Croix, Catholic anti-Semites created a diabolic image of Jews that took on a life of its own. The Jews of their own paranoid imagining really frightened these publicists; consumed with anxiety themselves, they encouraged the apprehensions of thousands of their fellow Catholics.5

Nationalist elements accounted for the third anti-Semitic theme sounded in the Dreyfus period. Anti-Semitic nationalists harped less on the external enemies of France than on the threat within—the danger that corrosive forces would eat away at the very foundations of French society, rendering the nation helpless and demoralized. The Jew, in this vision, was the rootless cosmopolitan, devoid of national loyalties and incapable of defending any interest but his own. For Maurice Barrès, one of the most celebrated nationalist writers at the turn of the century, Dreyfus's guilt was evident simply from the Jewishness of the convicted officer: "I need no one to tell me why Dreyfus committed treason... That Dreyfus is capable of treason, I conclude from his race."6

Riding the coattails of nationalism, anti-Semitism was thus carried by the most powerful popular ideology in Europe in the decade before World War I. During this era people throughout Europe were deeply moved by the concept and symbols of the nation state; practically no sphere of life escaped this influence. Not every nationalist was anti-Semitic, of course; practically everyone became nationalists—liberals, conservatives, radicals, moderates, clericals, anticlericals, socialists, and antisocialists—and so did the Jews among them. But nationalists had a tendency to look about, questioning the national "belongingness" of others, and often when they did so they found Jews wanting. It is important to remember that until recent times nothing was easier than to single out the Jews as outsiders: There were no blacks or Orientals to speak of in Europe in the nineteenth century, no large Muslim minority such as today assumes the role of outcasts in French society; moreover, there was no tradition of religious pluralism. Historically, the Jews seemed uniquely "different." From this it was a short step to depict them as strangers, a different race of people—or indeed, the enemies of the nation: the unremissible sin, as the Catholic liberal Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu described it in his generally sympathetic book about Jews published in 1893.

How strong was popular anti-Semitism during the Dreyfus years? Robert Byrnes argued that the organized anti-Semitic movement was heading into decline in early 1893, on the eve of Dreyfus's arrest. Although it had real national strength, its organizations were weak and fractious, weakening
the political cause. If Byrnes is correct, this would parallel a similar development in Germany, where the influence of anti-Jewish parties slipped significantly near the turn of the century. But while the political fortunes of anti-Semitism may have been waning in 1893-94, it seems also true that anti-Jewish ideas were deeply ingrained and widely disseminated. Once the press had thrust Jews prominently before the public with the Affair, groups and individuals had no trouble grasping the anti-Jewish message. According to Stephen Wilson, there were anti-Semitic demonstrations and riots in nearly seventy towns and cities in France in early 1898, with troops called in at least five times; that year twenty-two declared anti-Semitic deputies were elected to the Chamber of Deputies, together with forty more who would back anti-Semitic legislation. The political strength of anti-Semitism certainly declined after the Dreyfus Affair, Wilson notes, but the reason does not seem to have been a lack of popular support.
Eventually other issues, other causes, and other myths largely displaced the image of the Jewish bogeyman in the popular consciousness. Anti-Semitism did not disappear, but it proved less compelling as a defensive, integrating ideology than it had earlier. Perhaps that is the shred of comfort one may draw from the sordid tale of popular anti-Jewish ideology. Anti-Semitism offered a temporary palliative for those who abhorred class division, secularization, social mobility, or economic modernization in French society. Anti-Semitism both explained these mysterious processes—c’est la faute aux juifs (it’s the Jews’ fault)—and created in the national community a fictional refuge for those who sought an escape from the disorienting challenges of modernity. But change triumphed in the end. Popular anti-Semitism, for a time at least, slipped into France’s folkloric past.

Notes