Jews as Objects and Subjects in Western Political Thought

Preliminary Syllabus
NEJS 255B
Monday 9-11:50am
Location TBA

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Course Description

Jews are an archetypal minority in western political thought. The place of Jews in Christian and Muslim thought and their social and political situations at the dawn of modernity have made them a primary test case in debates about inclusion and exclusion, the relationship between money and politics, the nature of citizenship, representation and sovereignty, the place of religion in modern life and much else besides. This has placed modern Jews in a difficult position: they are at once political object and political subject. For many thinkers, Jews are a “type” that represents an array of (often contradictory) phenomena and streams of thought. They have been taken to embody capitalism and communism; the “egoist” and the communitarian; the revolutionary and the conservative; the nationalist and the cosmopolitan; the assimilationist and the eternal outsider. At the same time, real Jews, (rather than imagined “Jews”), have themselves struggled to find their place as subjects in modern political life. They have contended with these stereotypes - by rebutting them, absorbing them and trying to escape them - and endeavored to create their own place in the modern political landscape in a wide variety of ways.

This course will examine the dynamics between real and imagined Jews and their pivotal role in intellectual life of western political thought from the 17th century to the present. It will include both historical and theoretical material and discussions of comparisons to the experiences of other political minorities. Theoretical material will be drawn from the
fields of intellectual history, subaltern and postcolonial studies and gender studies. The course should be of interest to graduate students interested in modern political history, the history of ideas, religious studies and modern philosophy.

**Grading**

Requirements for the course include:

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<td>Presentation, participation and Reading Responses</td>
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<td>Final Paper, on a subject agreed upon with the instructor</td>
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A passing grade is required in all of the above categories in order to pass the course.

**Learning Goals**

By the end of the course, students will be able to describe the nature of imagined types in the construction of social and political ideologies. They will have a firm grasp of the ways that the Jew, as an imagined type and Jews as real human beings, constructed and were constructed by modern politics. They will be able to think comparatively in this vein about other categories, such as race and gender and sexuality. They will be able to use this theoretical basis as a way to think critically about modern politics from the perspective of those who are marginal to it.

**Technology policy**

Cell phones and other electronic devices are never permitted in class.

The evidence increasingly suggests that most students produce better work and receive higher grades when taking notes by hand rather than using a laptop, and that sitting near students using laptops and other electronic devices has a negative effect on your grades *even if you are not using such devices yourself*. For these reasons, I strongly encourage everyone to leave laptops packed away.

Email is the best way that I have to communicate with you outside of class. Even if email is not your usual mode of communication, please make sure that you check it every day in case I need to get in touch with you. Similarly, please make check Latte frequently so that you are aware of announcements about the course.
Credit Hours

Success in this 4 credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.)

Disabilities

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

Detailed Course Overview

The readings below will form the basis for our discussions each week. Most weeks, most students will be reading on selected chapters from the listed works; only students giving a presentation on a particular book will be expected to read it in its entirety.

Unit 1. Introduction

Week 1. Overview: The Jew in Western thought

A recent classic work about the “Jew” as an object of thought, constitutive of political thinking in Islamic and Christian cultures over two millennia. Nirenberg shows how the “Jew” was a type even in places where few or no actual Jews lived.

Unit 2. Political organization before and after emancipation

Week 2. Jewish Pre-Modern Politics

Before the emancipation, Jews under Christian and Muslim rule lived in semi-autonomous communities. This meant that they were treated as a collective body and had a large measure of self-government but were also vulnerable to changing political moods. These readings investigate the methods of Jewish self-governance (Finkelstein, Berkovitz) their strategies of engagement with rulers (Yerushalmi) and the ways these dynamics changed in the Early Modern period (Israel.)


Week 3. Emancipation’s Bargain

Debates over emancipation - the granting of political rights to Jews - was a defining feature of modern politics from the 18th century onwards. For Jews, the pursuit of emancipation was not a simple choice, but came at a price (Baron). Emancipation was not a uniform process. It had many reversals and also proceeded in different ways in different places, from the 18th to the 20th centuries (Birnbaum and Katznelson). It resulted in a remarkably diverse array of Jewish political arrangements in the 20th century (Mendelsohn).


Unit 3. Jews as political object and political subject

Week 4. Economics, Capitalism and Socialism

Marx’s classic text associating “Jewishness” with capitalism and a spiritual state that all people need to escape.


Jews approaching Marx’s legacy - socialism - in their own ways (Frankel) and also defining, and being defined by, the rise of consumerism in the 19th century (Lerner, Reuveni).


Paul Lerner The Consuming Temple: Jews, Department Stores, and the Consumer Revolution in Germany, 1880-1940 (Cornell University Press, 2015).


Week 5. Religion and Revelation

Jewish critiques of reason and the state from the perspective of law (Batnitzky and Brafman), philosophy (Strauss) and theology (Buber).


Week 6. Holocaust and Modernity

The Holocaust is a defining event of Jewish modernity, and of modern politics more generally. What is the relationship of the Holocaust to other elements of modernity (Bauman) and to Jewish politics in particular (Arendt)?


Week 7. Zionism

Various and conflicting Zionist ideologies (Shimoni) assert Jewish agency over the Jewish “type” in Western thought. But Zionist thinkers were themselves products of modern western thought (Stanislawski) as well as deeper political myths of Christian political history (Ohana).

Gideon Shimoni The Zionist Ideology (Brandeis University Press, 1997).

Week 8. Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights

The human rights regime was supported by many Jews as an attempt to universalize political identity and, paradoxically, to make room for particularist nationalisms, especially Zionism (Leoffler). Can shortcomings of human rights (Moyn) be addressed by any aspect of the Jewish experience?


Week 9. Gender and Sexuality

How did differences in gender affect the ways in which Jews approached modern political questions (Hyman, Kaplan and Moore)? How has the “Jew” as a political type been contributed by, and contributed to the construction of, categories of gender and sexuality (Boyarin, Brettschneider)?

Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore Gender and Jewish History (Indiana University Press, 2011).
Marla Brettschneider Family Flamboyant, the: Race Politics, Queer Families, Jewish Lives (SUNY Press, 2012).
Unit 4. Comparative perspectives and conclusion

Jews are not the only object of western political thought, nor the only “other” in that intellectual tradition. The following two sessions will introduce discussions that are parallel to the topic of this course. They will include the constitutive importance of the marginalization of women in western political thought (Okin), the co-construction of modern power and the categories of gender and sexuality (Foucault), and critiques of modern liberalism from the perspective of racial and postcolonial theory and the experiences of people of color (Fanon, Mills).

Week 10. Comparative Perspective I: Gender and Sexuality


Michel Foucault The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012).

Week 11. Comparative Perspective II: Race

Frantz Fanon The Wretched of the Earth (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2007).


Week 12. Judaism and modern politics

Our concluding discussion will be framed by a recent attempt to synthesize the Jew as subject and object (Slezkine) by widening the type of “Jew” beyond real Jews, without denying the latter an active role in determining their own modes of politics.


Week 13. Presentations and concluding discussion