

SJC 100 Freshman Honors Seminar
St. Joseph's College
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**Canaries in the Coal Mine? Europe's Jews and the European
Twenty-First Century: Mass Immigration, Antisemitism,
Xenophobia, Brexit, and Global Jihad**



French soldiers protect a Parisian Jewish child skateboarding to his school.

What is this course?

This course examines the contradictory situation in contemporary Europe. On the one hand Europe has never been more free, diverse and prosperous. The European Union has brought greater opportunity to tens of millions, and, with the collapse of the Communist bloc, it has been possible to dream of a truly united European super-continent.

At the same time, Europe sometimes appears to be teetering on the edge of disaster. With widespread discontent over EU policy, the awful reality of constant terrorism, the catastrophic inequality between “North” and “South,” and the weakening of nations’ social fabric (partially as a result of unprecedented levels of immigration). In all of this, Europe’s two million Jews once again seem to be playing the role of “canary in the coal-mine,” that is, the first to feel the consequences of these contradictions.

One of the great ironies in this situation has been the decline in the fortunes of the continent’s Jewish population. Largely annihilated during the Nazi Holocaust, Europe’s Jews, like Europe itself, made an astonishing recovery in the postwar era. Many of the continent’s institutions, including to a large degree the EU itself, were designed with the horrors of the Holocaust in mind. “Never Again,” the agreed upon “lesson” of the Nazi genocide, became the guiding principal. The Europe that emerged would have to be a place of cooperation and near utopian vision. And one thing that could never be tolerated again would be racism—and certainly not vilification of Jews.

Yet the terrible thing is, that same impulse to help, to save, to tolerate, has led Europe down a potentially dangerous path. By admitting many millions of immigrants (first from former colonies, then from refugee areas in Africa and the Middle East) Europe has changed life on the continent.

By focusing on the story of Europe’s Jews and the resurgence, and mainstreaming, of a variety of antisemitism, I hope to illuminate the complex problems facing Europe’s future, but also present the possible resources of hope. European nations, like their Jews, have, in the past hundred years, survived unspeakable horrors. There are reasons to believe they will survive this as well.

Course Objectives

My objectives for this course are as follows.

1. To have you develop a complex understanding of how history interacts with contemporary events in Europe.
2. To understand the differences between immigration in Europe (a series of ethnic-national states founded, built by and for these particular peoples with individual cultures that are traditionally defined and exclusive) and the US, a nation without an ethnicity, founded by refugees, built by slaves and immigrants.
3. To appreciate the special place Jews have played in European history and the role (unwillingly foisted upon them) as victims, whose persecution has helped to define what modern Europe is.
4. To appreciate the different responses Europeans have had to the current crisis.
5. To understand the connections between anti-Semitism and anti-Israel attitudes. A traditional formula has argued that people who are anti-Israel are not necessarily anti-Jewish. While this remains a valid argument, the two seem to have become inextricably linked in modern discourse—most notably on the extremes of Left and Right.

6. To understand the rise of the far-Right and anti-immigrant movements that have shaken the continent. The broad appeal of these movements has gone beyond the traditional older “reactionary” elements. In France, for example, the Far Right politician Marine Le Pen was recently polling FIRST among college age youth. Nearly a quarter of Dutch teenagers say they would like the Netherlands better “without Muslims.” Even twenty years ago such sentiments would have been scandalous.
7. Finally, to appreciate the bind Europe’s Jews now find themselves in. An old Jewish joke goes “Between those who love Jews and those who hate them, who can we trust?” “The ones who hate us,” comes the answer, “because at least they’re telling the truth.”
Europe’s Jews find themselves, more than ever, caught in the horns of that dilemma. A Europe that has been so oriented toward them, remains unhealthily obsessed by them.
Traditionally supporters of left-wing parties, they see themselves now as abandoned by much of the Left—and having to face constant threats in their home countries. Should they move to Israel? Tens of thousands have. But no, said one Italian Jew—we were in Italy before there were Christians or Muslims here, so we’re staying.

Assignments:

This course will consist of many (mostly short) scholarly readings, many films and documentaries, and one EXTREMELY controversial novel—Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*.

I’m going to ask you to read everything and participate in discussion all the time—that participation will be a part of your grade. But the major focus will be a journal you will keep and present weekly. The journal will consist of a series of short entries for each week’s reading/film, but rather than merely recording information, I’d like you to start each week with a reflection. Take a look at the topic I’ve laid out and write something about what you know, or how you react, to that topic. You may not know absolutely nothing about it—in which case your reaction might be entirely psychological. Then, after the film and readings, reflect a bit on what, if anything, you’ve learned. I expect the readings will inform you, but have they changed the way you

The point of this is to get you to think, at least partially, about the process of learning on a college-level.

The other assignment is, of course, a paper. I’ll meet with you individually to discuss topics and readings. My only real requirements is that it concerns one of the (many) issues raised by this course.

Class Participation will count for 20% of your grade, the journal entries 50%, and the final paper 30%.

Weekly Topics

Week One: The Current Crisis—Why has the future of Europe become such a contested ground? What happened to the model of toleration and social harmony we associated with recent history? Are the many promises of the EU really over? In focusing on recent events in Europe we find ourselves needing history, and plenty of it, since the bizarre contortions of contemporary Europe cannot be fathomed without a deep look at the recent past.

Readings: “Is it Time for the Jews to Leave Europe” Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* and selections from Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* (distributed to the class over the summer of 2018)

Film: *Ils sont partout (They are Everywhere)*

Week Two: Running away from the past (1945-1960s)—the decades after the Second World War saw Europe trying to start afresh—this had enormous consequences for the way Europe saw its history. In Communist bloc Europe Jewishness was erased, whereas in western Europe it was repressed.

Reading: Selections from Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*

Film: *The Story of the Jews* by Simon Schama, final episode.

Week Three: Discovering the Past (1970s and 80s)—In the 1970s and 80s Europeans began looking back on the events in their parents’ era with newly critical eye. This led to an interest in, and soon an obsession with, issues surrounding European Jews. Jewish citizens were themselves often instrumental in what Germans named it (as only they could) “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”—coming-to-terms with one’s past.

Reading: Henry Rousso, selections from *The Vichy Syndrome* and *Vichy, an Ever Present Past*,

Film: *The Nasty Girl*

Week Four: When Europe Loved Israel—the Six Day War and the Transformation of Jewish Identity—Israel, founded in 1948, held some sentimental attachment from Europeans but was of marginal interest until the 1967 war. That nation’s massive victory against a collective of larger armies won the hearts of many in Europe as a story of post-Holocaust redemption. For Jews, of course, it was a moment of great pride, having reversed their historical status as victims. Many in Europe joined in the good feeling—perhaps helped along by the psychological burden of the Nazi genocide now being lifted. But Europe’s neurotic relationship to its own colonial past, complicated the celebratory moment. For some on the Left, Israel now became part of Western Imperial Capitalism. Zionism, the term given to Jewish nationalism, became an admired and despised idea in post 1967 Europe—and has remained so since.

Reading: Selections from Michael Oren, *Six Days of War*, and Alain Finkielkraut.

Film: *The Forty Years War, Israel and the Arabs*

Week Five: Utopians (Socialism, Secularism, The European Union)—Europe’s new Vision—Despite only slightly lessened oppression in Communist dominated eastern Europe, the 1970s were an era of hope throughout the continent. A thaw in relations between East and West encouraged utopian visions of the future. It was in this context that a new type of European ideal began to emerge—seular, left-wing, open-minded, and anti-nationalistic. This new “homos europeanos” matched nicely with the notion of a unified transnational Europe. The fact that it excluded many poorer parts of the continent was, initially, overlooked.

Film: *Small Change*

Reading: *Europe Explained to My Daughter*

Week Six: The Left (re)discovers anti-Semitism

An element of this new “utopian” European thinking was an embrace of the causes of the Third World, especially the Muslim world. This, combined with a more cynical pursuit of Arab money and oil by the continent’s leaders, helped to re-awaken a dormant Left-wing antisemitism. Sometimes it limited itself to critiques of Israel, but most often it merged with traditional prejudices to create a toxic mix.

Encouraged as it was by Arab nationalism, it was nevertheless a somewhat limited phenomenon until very recently. This is of special importance today as significant parts of Europe’s populist Left (Jeremy Corbyn, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Beppe Grillo) seem to all but encourage antisemitism—the first two as an obvious ploy for Muslim votes.

Film: *Bader-Meinhof Complex*

Reading: Selections from *Contemporary Left Wing Antisemitism* by David Hirsh.

Week Seven: Holocaust Fatigue, Holocaust Denial, Holocaust Inversion

—Along with this populism and xenophobia has come a resurgent European nationalism. In some locales (including Germany and parts of eastern Europe) this has sometimes taken the form of Holocaust denial—worked well with ideas (popular among the Muslim population and certain elements of the far Left) about “Jewish conspiracies” and “Jewish power.” This has also led to an unholy alliance between Holocaust deniers, hyper-nationalist, and alienated members of the immigrant underclass. A sort of “Holocaust fatigue,” whereby any reference to Europe’s actual past is seen as “Jewish manipulation” has sometimes emerged. In addition, on the Left and egged on by Muslim populations, a vulgar “Holocaust inversion” has caught on—suggesting that it is the Jews themselves (via Israel) who now commit “genocide” and wildly inflated rhetoric regarding Israel (Apartheid, Genocide, Judeo-Nazis) has become quite common. The psychological elements of this, while quite transparent, are worth examining.

Readings: “Holocaust Inversion and Contemporary Antisemitism,” and selections from *Assasins of Memory* by Pierre Vidal-Naquet

Film: *Denial*

Week Eight: Importing Antisemitism? Colonial legacies and Muslim immigration— In 2014, in an act thoroughly consistent with both European humanism and Germany's special obligations, German Chancellor Angela Merkel invited, quite literally, millions of Muslims (ostensibly refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan) into Europe. This has been transformative for two reasons. First, it has dramatically damaged the security of Europe's Jews, as some of the new immigrants have engaged in terrorism and many of them hold shockingly anti-Semitic views, and Second, it has given new life to anti-immigrant (and anti-EU) sentiment. Many Jews, and more than a few non-Jews, have abandoned their traditional left-wing politics in the face of this seeming betrayal.

Film: *Arte* documentary (suppressed, later shown anyway) on anti-Semitism among Muslim immigrants in Europe.

Week Nine: Brussels vs Europe (populism and xenophobia).

Once on the margins, concerns about the EU (coined "Euroskepticism") became a major force in European politics after the introduction of a single currency in 2002. Euroskeptics could (and can) be Left or Right, but a prominent element among them is a dislike of big, over-reaching European (Brussels) government. The Left sees it as serving primarily the interests of capitalism, whereas the Right sees it as chipping away at the fabric of national identity. Combined with increasing fears about mass immigration (from the Muslim world AND from "new" European states like Romania) the populist movement has gained enormous power—culminating, obviously, in Brexit. Although the Left has traditionally been the home of Europe's Jews, many have been drawn to the populist Right with their anti-immigration policies.

Film: *La Promesse*

Week Ten: Facing Global Jihad—Sadly, 21st century Europe has been riven with unspeakable acts of terrorism. Although most European Muslims find these appalling, it is an enormous problem within these communities. As one may expect, Jews have been especially targeted. The historical irony (Muslims were welcomed into Europe because of European guilt over past racism (ie, The Holocaust) is almost too much to bear.

Reading: "Global Antisemitism, Crisis of Modernity" Charles Small.

Film: *24 Days: The True Story of the Ilan Halimi Affair*

Week Eleven: The Future is Female: Islamists and European feminisms-- While much of the European political class had been slow to react to the antisemitism among immigrant communities, the treatment of women has been harder to ignore (not least because Jews are only less than 1% of Europe's population whereas women are 50%!) Especially following the sexual violence in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, European women have demanded scrutiny of Muslim communities. The laissez-faire relativism of the 1970s, 80s and 90s is increasingly

replaced by “intolerance or intolerance.” One of the most interesting developments is how this has encouraged a new sort of secular feminism to emerge among women in European Muslim communities—some even embracing the French secularism. Readings include: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Fadela Amara.

Week Twelve: 2015, Europe’s annus horribilis (Charlie Hebdo, Bataclan, refugee crises, New Year’s Germany)—2015 saw the culmination of every pessimists worst fears. The seeming collapse of European civil society had significant political consequences, including Brexit and Jewish emigration. In ways not yet measured, it may have altered Europe’s course for the near future.

Reading: *Submission* by Michel Houellebecq

Film: *I am Charlie*

Week Thirteen: Listening to the *Banlieu*:-- Despite all the bad news, there are some hopeful signs emerging from the “no-go zones” inhabited by Europe’s largely . If there is a future for a successful Europe, perhaps it will emerge not from the EU’s leaders, but from sectors of the Muslim populations themselves. From the mayors of London and Rotterdam, to the residents of the suburbs of Paris and Stockholm, there remain reasons to be hopeful. Perhaps, we will consider, the utopians were not all wrong?

Film: *The Class (entre les murs)*

Week Fourteen: Brexit(s)—Finally, we take-on the biggest populist revolt of them all—a revolt spurred on in no small part by the same factors that have caused Jews to leave (or wish to leave) the continent. What are the dynamics of Brexit? How have British politics (with the rise of Jeremy Corbyn) embodied the current crisis? Will Brexit create greater prosperity, integration, security? And is, as the joke says, Brexit good for the Jews?