

Monday, 16.10.2023; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CEST

Jay Geller, Vanderbilt University, USA

“After all, it’s only an animal”: Antisemitism, Racism, and the Human-Animal Great Divide

Trigger warning for attending audiences and students: We would like to disclose that some audiences may find the verbal and visual content of this presentation triggering or offensive as it draws on antisemitic and racist representations. The material includes content that touches on: animal cruelty or animal death, violence and trauma connected to antisemitism, racism and racial conflict, antisemitic and racial slurs. We ask attending audiences who may feel triggered, overwhelmed or panicked by the content to take the necessary steps for their emotional safety. This may include withdrawing from the presentation or reaching out to one of the event organisers for support.

Abstract:

Before the defining and dividing of human societies in the modern era comes the foundational classification of humanity over and against the animal, the human-animal Great Divide. In *Minima Moralia* (c. 1944–45) Theodor Adorno isolated the phrase “it’s only an animal” as the telltale justification for the possibility of “pogroms” against “savages, blacks, Japanese.” Before offering his portent, Adorno speculates about how the victims traditionally associated with pogroms, i.e., Jews, have been perceived: “Perhaps the social schematism of perception in anti-Semites is such that they do not see Jews as human beings at all.” The social production of human invisibility is also, in Zygmunt Bauman’s terms, the “social production of moral invisibility”: it forecloses the no-longer-recognized-as-human group from the universe of obligation.

But concomitant with rendering the human invisible is rendering the animal—the species difference—visible. The ascription of intersecting identifiers not only enacted both the subordination or marginalization of those so marked (e.g., Jew, Black, animal) and the dominance of the unmarked markers (e.g., Gentile, White, human), it also (re)constructed the authority of hierarchical oppositions indexed by each identifier. Hence to analogize or identify Jews or Blacks with animals not only maintains the hierarchical opposition of Jew and Gentile, Black and White, but that of Animal and Human as well. Such intersections also maintained the normativity of hierarchical determinations within each identifying category as well as reinforced the stigma (or prestige) of each categorical identification.

In my presentation I will attend to the ascription (and manufacture) of animality that

- enacted the subordination or marginalization of “the Jew” and the dominance of the Gentile and
- similarly functioned with regard to a racially-identified group, people of predominantly sub-Saharan African descent (blacks), and the corresponding race-identifying group, people of predominantly European descent (whites).

I will focus on several shared sites for the generation of these bestial ascriptions by one human group (the identifying) upon another (the identified):

First, two that emerge with regard to specific animals—

- the geographical (contemporaneous first contacts by one human group with both another human group and a proximate animal group) and

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- the dietary (the specific animal source of food allegedly eaten or not eaten by the other human group)—

and, then, one with “the animal” (collective singular) in its varieties that emerges with fears of the identified group passing in the wake of emancipation (i.e., their integration into the human community of moral obligation).

And perhaps a fourth: how, in anticipation of possible cognitive dissonance generated by the divergence of an appearance of humanity from the ascription of animality, practices are developed to make members of the designated group become “animal” to the dominant group.

Bio:

Jay Geller is Professor of Modern Jewish Culture, emeritus, at Vanderbilt University, where he taught from 1994 to 2021. He is the author of *On Freud's Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumcisions* (2007, Fordham), *The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity* (2011, Fordham), and *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews* (2018, Fordham). His current project is “S(h)ibboleth: Circumcision and Jewish Survival during the Shoah,” which draws upon hundreds of audiovisual testimonies, memoirs, survivor literature and films.