

“Our age is not only the most Jewish,
but also the most effeminate of all ages.”

Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 1903

Women, Jews, and Modernity in Otto Weininger

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Otto Weininger

Modern society's high-minded declarations about the universal equality of all human beings did not immediately correlate with support for the emancipation of women and Jews or equal rights for people of color. Even more puzzling, the modern period produced new ideas of difference and new arguments for exclusion along the lines of religion, gender, and race. The discourse about women and Jews provides insights into the historically changing self-understanding of modern society through shifting ideas of difference. How have notions of Jewishness and femininity served to define modern gentile masculinity? What role did they play in debates about the boundaries of citizenship and the nation? How did ideas about women and Jews help to make sense of the experience of rapid social and economic change and the disappearance of familiar forms of life?

One important work that sheds light on these questions is *Sex and Character* by Otto Weininger (1880–1903). In it, this Viennese author from a Jewish family, who converted to Protestantism a year before his death, develops an often bizarre theory of modern existence based on the opposition of male and female principles, and offers an exposition of Judaism that details how the Jewish mind-set produced many of the ills of modernity. After Weininger's suicide at the age of 23, the same year his book was published, he became widely regarded as a tragic young genius. Sales of his book rose dramatically; for many, it seemed to offer answers to some of the most intractable questions of modern life (in fact, Nazi propagandists drew upon segments).

While Weininger begins his work with a startling thesis, that “between Man and Woman there are **innumerable gradations**” (emphases in the original), he soon abandons the idea of the universal bisexuality of all human beings and slips into a theory of gender polarity in which “men” and “women” appear as utterly distinct. The “ideal man” known as “M” is, for Weininger, in all respects the direct opposite of “W,” the “ideal woman.” Where M is characterized by internal homogeneity and clear subject boundaries, W is an amorphous aggregate, fused with the people around her and dissolving subject boundaries by means of her corroding sexuality. While M is directed by reason and logic, in W, thinking and feeling are one; while he possesses self-awareness and self-control, she lacks both. M has continuous memory, free will, and is guided by moral principles. W’s memory is fragmentary and involuntary; she lacks self-reflexivity and self-control, is determined by her drives, and is incapable of moral sensibilities. Worst of all, these qualities threaten to undermine the male subject’s hard-won boundedness, stability, and self-control.

The commonalities between Jews and women are, according to Weininger, astonishing. Like woman, “the Jew is the blurrer of boundaries κατ’ ἐξοχήν [par excellence].” Like her, he has a strong interest in sex; both women and Jews live only in the collective, not as individuals. Weininger does not, however, “attribute to the Jew a larger share of femininity than to the Aryan.” The Jewish character is unique. Among other things, whereas woman “passively assumes any form,” the Jew “actively adapts...to any environment and any race.” He “has an *eminently conceptual* disposition, which woman totally lacks.” The “Jew’s” mental activity, however, is not creative; he is a critic, a skeptic, a

nonbeliever. Therefore “he takes refuge in material things, [...] the only value he actually recognizes is the money he ‘earns.’” For Weininger, the “Jew” is associated with both capitalism and communism, and with the “mechanistic and materialistic worldview” of modern science. “Judaism...is that movement in science which regards science above all as a *means to the end* of ruling out anything transcendent.” Hence, “the spirit of modernity is Jewish, wherever one looks at it.”

How can we make sense of these ideas, and, perhaps more importantly, how can we explain why the book was taken so seriously at the time? In an astonishing moment of self-reflection, Weininger admits, “we hate in others only what we never want to be, but always are in part,” and describes both the hatred of women and Jews as outward “projections” of such unwanted features. Looking at the relationship of “Aryan man,” “woman,” and “Jew” once again in this light, what is being projected here?

Weininger’s rational, bounded, self-aware, and self-controlled M strikingly resembles a hypertrophied version of the Enlightenment ideal of the subject that had dominated much of the 19th century, but had lost a lot of its power by the end of it. This is obvious in the work of Weininger’s Viennese contemporary Sigmund Freud. Reading the relationship of M and W tentatively through a Freudian lens would suggest that M represents the conscious regions of the self, while the female principle is associated with those regions that escape self-awareness and threaten the boundaries, autonomy, and stability of the subject, that is, the libidinous impulses of the id that are suppressed and denied.

But even assuming that Weininger’s fear of woman really is the fear of the disrupt-

tive forces of the id, how can we make sense of the specific features of Weininger's Jew, who bears characteristics far beyond the threat of untamed sexuality? And what might have made this figure so apparently convincing at the time? If we compare the figure of the Jew to that of woman, it seems obvious that the Jew undermines emphatic individuality in a different way, one more closely associated with the perception of a crisis of modernity that influenced much of the cultural production of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and other metropolises. Fear of an emerging mass society that undermines identity and independence, worry about the increasing power of intangible social forces, in particular those of a modern economy, and a sense of disenchantment and loss of meaning dominated intellectual concerns. Hence, one could hypothetically see the threat that Weininger's "Jew" poses to his "Aryan man" as symbolizing the threat that modern society itself seems to pose to the older ideal of the rational, autonomous individual, connoted as male, at the end of the century.

This reading would suggest that the antagonists in Weininger's world theater, M and W, the "Aryan" and the "Jew," could be seen as externalized personifications of immanent contradictions of modern society and the bourgeois subject itself. Because the modern subject can never completely overcome its embodied existence, its libidinous impulses and irrational wishes, and its fundamental dependency on others, it is not yet really what it ought to be according to the 19th-century masculine ideal, namely M or "Aryan." Instead, because this masculine subject is constituted by a society that increasingly tends to level out the "individualities" of the individuals and thus is both midwife and gravedigger, his instability becomes more keenly felt toward

the turn of the century. Even though fashioned as opposites, Weininger's ideas of masculinity, femininity, "Aryanness," and Jewishness thus emerge as deeply entangled, as nothing but externalized facets of a contradictory whole, and symbols of a society in the midst of enormous social, economic, and cultural transformations.