

The “Science” of Racism

The nineteenth century was dominated by great scientific advances. Sewage systems were installed in cities, vaccines were invented against many killer diseases, and doctors began sterilizing their instruments before operating on patients.

Impressed by the power of science to strengthen society, many people turned to science to justify their prejudices. In Philadelphia, a white doctor, Samuel Morton, announced that races could be ranked by the size of their brains. By measuring skulls of whites and blacks, he was able to “prove” that whites were superior.

Antisemites were obsessed with Jews’ bodies, which they claimed were inferior to Indo-European, or Aryan, bodies. In books and cartoons they portrayed Jews with flat feet, hawk-shaped noses, thick lips, and dark complexions. Antisemites also charged that Jewish men could not measure up to the masculine ideal. They portrayed them as weak and nervous—the opposite of “real men.” Today these stereotypes may be signs of ignorance, but at the time many people believed they were scientific truths.



Dreyfus in court. The Dreyfus Affair, as it is commonly known, divided France for over a decade. “Because he was a Jew he was arrested,” wrote Bernard Lazare, one of Dreyfus’s Jewish supporters. “Because he was a Jew he was convicted, because he was a Jew the voices of justice and truth could not be heard in his favor!”

headline of a passionate defense of Dreyfus. It was written by France’s most popular author, Émile Zola. The open letter to the president of France was published on January 13, 1898. But antisemites were equally passionate. Antisemitic riots swept through many French cities and towns. As for Zola, he was forced to flee France.

In 1906 Dreyfus was finally cleared of all charges and allowed to resume his army career. But the lasting message of the Dreyfus Affair was not his eventual legal victory. It was that more than a century after the emancipation of French Jews, antisemitism was still a force in French social and political life.



Emile Zola's famous letter in defense of Dreyfus was printed on the front page of *L'Aurore*, a literary magazine.



One way we treat ourselves with dignity is to take care of our personal appearance. But when does a healthy concern for how we look turn into an obsession? When do the ways in which we alter our bodies signal disrespect rather than respect for who we are?

The Plague of Self-Doubt

Jewish reactions to antisemitism varied. Some of the more assimilated Jews found their own scapegoats for antisemitism. They blamed newly immigrated Eastern European Jews, many of whom were streaming into Western and Central European cities during this period.

The East Europeans seemed to be the living image of the antisemitic stereotypes. They

dressed differently and had not yet adopted middle-class values and lifestyles. Many still spoke with heavy accents or, even worse, spoke only Yiddish. In short, Western and Central European Jews were embarrassed by their Eastern European brothers and sisters.

Many Jews also started to doubt themselves. After hearing the anti-Jewish rants for so long,