

Whiteness Scholars vs. the Jews

Seth Forman

That large numbers of American Jews have been attracted to the tenets of twentieth-century liberalism is a long-established fact. Scholars like Seymour Martin Lipset, Earl Raab, Steven Cohen, Lawrence Fuchs, Charles Liebman, Stephen Whitfield, and Marshall Sklare have all concurred, to varying degrees, with Milton Himmelfarb's famous dictum that "while Jews earn more than any ethnoreligious group for whom data exist, they are more liberal to left in their opinions than other white groups, and they vote like Hispanics."¹

The only inspired debate regarding Jews and liberalism takes place over the causes and consequences of this commitment. It was in this context that I began to explore the topic of Jews and blacks in the postwar era. My thought was that the movement for black equality—as opposed to, say, gun control or feminism—was the one arena in which the impact on the Jewish community of liberal politics could be most easily evaluated. The research for my book was briefly scuttled, however, when I discovered that, according to the most recent scholarship, Jews were in fact neither liberal when it came to civil rights, nor particularly sympathetic toward blacks. Apparently, a new paradigm has arisen among academics in which any and all distinguishing features of American Jews must be subordinated to the fact of their European origins. When it came to the topic of race, I discovered, American Jewish liberalism had become the most conspicuous victim of the contemporary scholarship of "whiteness."

Whiteness scholarship emerged in the late 1960s as a response to the growing consensus among liberal social scientists that the persistence of black inequality in the wake of civil rights victories resulted from cultural deficiencies laid upon blacks by centuries of slavery and discrimination. Sociologists like Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Oscar Lewis promoted the idea that when black Americans could find their footing in the urban milieu, developing strong institutions of self-help, a more stable family life, and political unity, they would eventually take their place as equal partners in a culturally diverse urban system.²

Repulsed by the twin ideas that white racism should be losing its explanatory power in relation to black impoverishment, and that some ethnic groups

Seth Forman teaches in the Political Science Masters Program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY. He is the author of *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York University Press, 1998).

possessed cultural traits more suitable for success than others, the scholars of whiteness emphasized the very sharp distinctions between the black experience and the experience of European immigrants. They sought, in effect, to recast American history as a story of racial exclusion rather than of immigrant inclusion. Beginning in the 1960s with the work of Robert Blauner, and continuing today with authors like Ron Takaki, David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, Michael Paul Rogin, and Matthew Frye Jacobson, whiteness scholarship seeks to show that the social mobility of the Irish, the Italians, the Greeks, the Poles, and, most of all, the Jews, resulted not from any habits of culture or individual effort, but from a mutable definition of whiteness, a definition that ultimately evolved to the point where it included all European immigrant groups, but not to the point where it included blacks and other non-Europeans.³ Matthew Frye Jacobson says it best in his book *Whiteness of a Different Color* when he writes that the pretty immigrant story of ethnic mobility and assimilation on the European model quickly “fades once one recognizes how crucial Europeans’ racial status . . . was . . . and how completely intertwined were the prospects of becoming American and becoming Caucasian.”⁴

It is no accident that this effort to wrap all European immigrant groups in the blanket of “white privilege” so often focuses on Jews. It is they, after all, who stand out in the public conscience as having the strongest claim to historical victimization. So the first thing the whiteness scholars set out to do is to deny all forms of Jewish exceptionalism—that is, to resist or reinterpret all evidence that the Jews are in fact different from other white Americans, and to do so in precisely those areas where they appear most different: (1) in their economic success, and (2) in their political liberalism.

In his highly regarded 1989 book *The Ethnic Myth*, for example, the sociologist Stephen Steinberg sets out to “whiten” Jewish economic mobility. Discounting the nuances of any cultural habits, customs, or beliefs that may have followed Jews over the centuries, Steinberg insists Jewish success in America was really a matter of chance. Steinberg writes that “Jewish success in America was a matter of historical timing . . . [T]here was a fortuitous match between the experience and skills of Jewish immigrants, on the one hand, and the manpower needs and opportunity structures on the other.” In an earlier book, *The Academic Melting Pot*, Steinberg took aim at Jewish educational achievement. American Jews, Steinberg insists, “did not become middle-class and produce a class of scholars because they placed a special value on learning, but because they were middle-class first, and then adopted education as a component of middle-class values.” So easily, for proponents of Marxist determinism, are the centuries of rabbinic tradition discarded.⁵

Taking her cue from Steinberg, the historian Karen Brodtkin argues that the theorists of American Jewish exceptionalism are gravely mistaken in their belief that Jewish success in America has been the result of such cultural traits as strong family ties, a high value placed on education, and hard work. In her

estimation, it was the postwar economic boom accompanied by massive government programs like the GI Bill of Rights and Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance that were largely responsible for the mobility of Jews in the postwar period. While Brodtkin does not bother to determine if Jews benefitted from these programs any more or any less than other groups of whites, it does not prevent her from labeling these programs “affirmative action” for all white males, or from lumping Jews together with other “Euro-ethnics” as equal partners in a white opportunity pool. For Brodtkin, Jews, like all other white ethnics, were essentially passive players and furtive beneficiaries of a century of increasing economic wealth and government good cheer.⁶

More troubling, however, than the whitening of Jewish mobility is the negation of Jewish liberalism, an historical erasure which can be observed nowhere more clearly than in the redefining of the Jewish record on race relations. This attack on the heavy Jewish involvement in civil rights has by now a long history. In his 1967 volume *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Harold Cruse argued that Jews had become a huge problem for blacks precisely because they had so identified with the black struggle. Cruse’s belief that Jewish involvement in black causes was “fraught with serious dangers to all concerned” may have put off some moderates. But his thesis, essentially that Jewish support for black equality has been deleterious to black Americans, has exhibited remarkable staying power. In their 1970 book *Bittersweet Encounter*, the first history to come out on blacks and Jews in the wake of the tumultuous 1960s, Robert Weisbord and Arthur Stein explain that the central purpose of their book is to prove that “the racism of many Jews is inseparable—and indistinguishable from—white American racism.” “For it has been true of American Jewry,” write the authors, “that when all is said and done, more has been said than done.” The well-known political scientist Andrew Hacker, in a contribution to a 1994 volume on the subject of blacks and Jews, argues in similar fashion that Jewish involvement in racial matters amounted to an “ego trip” and that this “raises the question of whether the well-meant motives underlying Jewish racism put it on a different level from biases that are obviously less sympathetic.” Thus does the historic Jewish contribution to civil rights become no more noble than a lynching bee.⁷

Speaking of the World War I era civil rights alliance of blacks and Jews, the Pulitzer prize winning historian David Levering Lewis argues that it was not a common history of oppression which resulted in good will on the part of Jews toward blacks, but merely self-interest. “Theirs was a politically determined kinship,” writes Lewis, “a defensive alliance, cemented more from the outside than from within.” Like Harold Cruse before him, Lewis insists that this opportunistic alliance served Jewish purposes far better than it did black purposes, as it allowed Jews to fight against discrimination by using blacks as surrogates.⁸

Unfortunately, it is not at all difficult to see that denying Jewish empathy with blacks for the sake of maintaining the purity of the color line bears an unmistakable resemblance to the aims of certain black extremists. Race agitators like Louis Farrakhan, Leonard Jeffries, and Tony Martin are also interested in ensuring the “whiteness,” or empowerment, of the Jews so as to preserve their belief in the uniformity of white evil. For these agitators, Jews aren’t just whites, they are the “whitest” of the white. They didn’t participate in the slave trade, they orchestrated it. Jews are not just overrepresented in Hollywood, they are the wardens of Hollywood’s racist images, and so on.

So while one should not confuse the blatant racism of a Farrakhan or a Jeffries with the more nuanced racial hierarchies of Steinberg or Brodtkin, you might be surprised at the extent to which the most dubious claims about Jews have been used to chart the direction of recent historical research.

In the realm of popular culture, celebrated Berkeley scholar Michael Paul Rogin identifies Jews as the leading culprits in the enslavement of blacks through popular images. According to Rogin, Jewish performers like Al Jolson donned the blackface mask not merely to share in the power of black expressiveness, or to hide their Jewishness, but to accentuate their whiteness, to demonstrate their superiority to blacks, and to gain acceptance in the Hollywood melting pot when blacks could not. Rogin sets out in his 1996 *Black Face, White Noise* to “untie the knot” that hides the Jewish dominance of a racist mass culture behind Jewish liberalism, and to reveal the Jews’ “own stain of shame.”⁹

Even in such a historically useful and nuanced volume like Matthew Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color*, by far the most impressive work in the whiteness genre, the sympathetic Jew in popular culture is apparently not what he seems. For Jacobson, the target is Laura Hobson’s 1946 novel *Gentlemen’s Agreement*. Coming on the heels of World War II, the novel and the 1947 film based on it was a moving, thought-provoking drama, that revealed the subtle anti-Semitism of decent, average Americans. But Jacobson skewers Hobson for her unwillingness to expand the discussion to include a lesson in antiblack racism. “What one cannot learn from this book about restrictive housing covenants,” Jacobson writes, “is that in 1946, the year before the novel appeared, in the single city of Chicago . . . there were more than thirty residential bombings whose aim was not the expulsion of Jews by non-Jews, but the expulsion of ‘Negroes’ by ‘Caucasians.’” But, of course, despite its title, Hobson’s book is not specifically about “housing covenants,” but about the full round of prewar anti-Semitism, including the exclusionary policies of vacation resorts, job discrimination, and school yard bullying. One might think that with daily revelations of Hitler’s atrocities, a drama about anti-Semitic attitudes in 1940s America, however subtle and guarded, might stand on its own progressive merits. But Hobson’s book is flawed, according to Jacobson, because it “provides no moral syntax for commenting upon antiblack racism at all.”¹⁰

Rogin and Jacobson are joined in their focus on popular culture by the historian Jeffrey Melnick, who, in his recent book *A Right to Sing the Blues*, suggests that the involvement of both Jews and blacks in the development of popular music was anything but a harmonious enterprise. Melnick argues that Jews like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin skillfully created the myth that they were the proper interpreters of black culture, elbowing out “real” black Americans in the process. Despite evidence that Jews in the music business played a crucial role in paving the way for mainstream acceptance of black culture, Melnick concludes that “by denying African American artists the fruits of their labor in urban spaces, Jews had come to function as oppressors.”¹¹

Even the work of certain Jewish scientists concerning racial groups is not safe from the academic obsession with white privilege. Vernon J. Williams, in *Rethinking Race: Frans Boas and His Contemporaries*, sets out to show that the Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas, widely credited with the largest role in eviscerating scientific racism, subscribed in substantial degree to nineteenth-century racist views on black capabilities.¹²

The history of whiteness clearly falsifies a truly admirable record of Jews in civil rights. As historians like Murray Friedman and Hasia Diner have aptly demonstrated, beginning in the 1920s Jews were alone among white American ethnic groups in seeking out similarities between themselves and black Americans, and in mobilizing politically around an alliance with blacks.¹³

But the biggest problem with whiteness as a scholarly paradigm is that, by always associating Jews with privilege, it fails to address the peculiar difficulties Jews face living in a free society. Yes, for a long time now Jews have been inside America’s inexorably expanding circle of opportunity. But this has left them with the dilemma of deciding between complete assimilation and survival, or some always inadequate compromise between the two. Blacks, of course, face no such dilemma. They are the “omni-Americans,” a people whose experience has largely defined American history, and who derive substantial cultural and political advantages from this. Blacks have utilized, with impressive effectiveness, the special place they occupy in U.S. history in order to develop a cultural unity that has, for the most part, escaped American Jews. Whatever else the ubiquitous reminders of black victimization might mean, winning official confirmation of collective status through race-based governmental programs and private foundation sponsorship, open college admissions, black electoral districts, and “Afrocentric” school curricula has assured blacks a powerful form of racial identity. Jews, quite rightly, receive none of this support, and, as a consequence, face greater cultural challenges. The preoccupation of so many Jews with the black struggle for equality, particularly those in leadership circles, has obscured the fact that Jews and Judaism are not integral to American politics and culture, as blacks are, and that therefore their own collective needs may, at any particular moment, be more pressing than the black need for social redress. For whatever else the black fight for racial equal-

ity has meant, it has never been, and is not now, a struggle principally about the continued corporate existence of black Americans. Conversely, the struggle for corporate existence appears to be one in which American Jews are now intimately engaged. The whiteness scholars, so determined in their crusade to uncover the universality of white racism—and, hence, to consign blacks to the abyss of permanent victimhood—are oblivious to all of this.

Notes

1. Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 148; Earl Raab, "Are Jews Still Liberal?" *Commentary* 101, no. 2 (February 1996): 43-45; Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, "Jewish Liberalism Revisited," *Commentary* 102, no. 5 (November 1996): 51-53; Steven Cohen, *1988 National Survey of American Jews* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1988), 3; Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956); Werner Cohn, "The Sources of American Jewish Liberalism," in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, ed. Marshall Sklare (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958); Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 149-150.
2. Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1965); Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1963); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, ed. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1967).
3. David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994); Noel Ignatiev, *How The Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Michael Paul Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
4. Jacobson, 9.
5. Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 103; *The Academic Melting Pot: Catholics and Jews in American Higher Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 74.
6. Karen Brodtkin Sacks, "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" in *Race*, ed. Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjeck (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 84.
7. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 364; Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter: African Americans and American Jews* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970), xxii, 218; Andrew Hacker, "Jewish Racism, Black Anti-Semitism," in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Delacorte Press, 1994), 162-163.
8. D. L. Lewis, "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the Early 1930s," *Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984), 31.
9. Rogin, 11.
10. Jacobson, 128.
11. See Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (1976; New York, Vintage, 1982), 205; Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 151.
12. Vernon J. Williams, *Rethinking Race: Frans Boas and His Contemporaries* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).
13. Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: Jews and Blacks 1915-1935* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977).