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Introduction

Race Relations and the Invisible Jew

There are cases where success is a tragedy.
—Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky

[T]here is nothing so indigenous, so ‘made in America’ as we.
—W. E. B. Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn

Since the early 1970s, the relationship between Blacks and Jews has been the subject of a substantial amount of scholarly attention, not least because of the conflicts between the two groups that came to the surface in the 1960s. During this period, long-standing differences over such issues as community control of school districts, racial preferences, the role of Israel in world politics, open admissions at universities, and the anti-Semitism of some controversial Black leaders began to outweigh the mutually perceived common interests that had for decades worked to cement cooperation between significant segments of both groups.¹

In light of these developments, it is not hard to see why scholars in search of a better understanding of the relationship between Blacks and Jews continue to see this history in the framework of alliance and conflict. Jonathan Kaufman epitomizes this predisposition in his 1988 book Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times between Blacks and Jews in America, in which he laments that throughout his volume “runs a remembrance of a time when great changes seemed possible and people embraced alliances and coalitions—and puzzlement and sadness that politics and personal relationships have today become polarized and fragmented.”² Even Murray Friedman, a writer who views the prospects for a future Black-Jewish alliance with an unusual degree of ambivalence, confesses in his 1995 book What Went Wrong: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance, “I do not
pretend to be neutral on the subject of the Black-Jewish alliance; it has meant so much to me for so long." 

The framework of alliance and conflict has, at times, been a useful way of thinking about the past and has resulted in perhaps the most extensive body of knowledge on the interaction of two American ethnic groups that we now possess. But this approach has carried with it a number of limitations traceable to the highly contested and extremely volatile nature of race relations. In writing about Blacks and Jews, many historians have been unwilling to relinquish some standard and highly valued presumptions about white racism and its impact on Blacks and have therefore approached the subject of Blacks and Jews as merely an extension of the study of relations between Blacks and whites. Needless to say, this historiographical dynamic has resulted in an interesting and disturbing irony. The inclination has been to interpret the behavior of both Blacks and Jews as typical of the broader patterns that have characterized race relations in the United States, lacking any of the extraordinary character that, one would presume, had originally drawn so many writers to the subject in the first place. Specifically, there has been an apparent unwillingness on the part of historians to explore the reasons for and the meaning of what, considering the legacy of white racism in the United States, appears to have been an unusually high degree of sympathy toward Blacks within Jewish circles and, on the other hand, considering the general decline of anti-Semitic attitudes, a surprising and persistently high level of anti-Semitism among Black Americans. Historians straining under the pressure of contemporary racial politics have sought to smooth over a history characterized by the peculiar unevenness and unpredictability of human interaction and have engaged in a considerable amount of scholarly acrobatics in order to do so. The result has been a series of interpretations that redefine benevolent Jewish attitudes toward Blacks as primarily motivated by self-interest and, to that extent, not markedly distinct from the racist attitudes of the larger white society. Black anti-Semitism, within this scholarly paradigm, has become only the most vocal manifestation of a largely justified animosity toward whites. Robert Weisbord and Arthur Stein's *Bittersweet Encounter* was the first attempt to survey the history of Blacks and Jews in the wake of the tumult of the late 1960s and is typical of this approach. The central purpose of this book, as stated by its authors, is to prove that "the racism of many Jews is inseparable—and indistinguishable from—white American racism." The authors claim that Black anti-Semitism has been wildly exaggerated and conclude their volume by asserting that American Jews have been equal
partners with white gentiles in America’s racist past. “The Jewish community is faced with the challenging task of marshaling its considerable resources and energies to assist the Black man’s quest for freedom and equality,” the authors write. “For it has been true of American Jewry . . . that when all is said and done, more has been said than done.”4

The difficulties that stem from squeezing the history of Blacks and Jews into the familiar pattern of white racism and Black victimization are twofold. First, the impropriety involves forcing Black history into a paradigm that denies the fullness of Black humanity and the rich texture of Black life—the failure, in the words of Ralph Ellison, to recognize that “Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man’s dilemma.” Second, and more to the point for the purposes of this book, consigning Jews to the role of white oppressor obscures their unique approach to race relations and, by extension, American life in general. It is the absence of any sustained or consistent analysis about what the distinctive Jewish posture toward Blacks tells us about American Jews that this book attempts to address. American Jews of all backgrounds seemed singularly drawn to the enormity of the race question throughout the postwar period. By exploring the attitudes of Jews while they were engaged in a number of specific racial episodes—desegregation in the South, integration efforts in the North, the ascendance of certain Black writers, and the advent of Black Power—it is possible to construct a foundation for understanding American Jewish life.

This analysis attempts to uncover the reasons why Jews got involved in Black affairs in such a large way, what the implications of their particular involvement has been in terms of Jewish culture, and what all of this can tell us about American Jews and their lives today. In this sense, the study is an exercise in self-reflection, using Jewish thinking about Black Americans to illuminate the often complex amalgam of emotions, memories, presumptions, and beliefs that constitute Jewish identity.

The necessity of rescuing Jewish history from the mantra of white racism becomes manifest when one considers the intensity of the effort to submerge Jewish particularity. Since the late 1960s a generation of scholars has carved out careers documenting the nature of America’s “color line,” a social phenomenon even those possessing only the most rudimentary knowledge of America’s racist past should be generally familiar with. It is no wonder that this scholarly endeavor has borne enormous fruit, with radical historians and activists such as Vine DeLoria, Robert Blauner, Stephen Steinberg, Ron Takaki, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant generally succeeding over the past three decades in establishing the separation of Blacks
and whites as the key to understanding American pluralism. With the work of these authors, the idea that the experience of European immigrant groups in the United States has been categorically different from the experience of Blacks, insofar as access to power and economic opportunities are concerned, has become thoroughly enshrined. The catchphrase of this scholarly perspective is “white skin privilege,” an allusion to what these critics believe has been a permanent advantage enjoyed by European ethnic groups over dark-skinned Americans in making their way to middle-class respectability.

Such scholarly revisionism was originally a reaction to the movement of liberal social scientists in the early 1960s toward a cultural explanation for the inferior socioeconomic status of Blacks and other similarly deprived minority groups. While the “culture of poverty” explanation for the failure of the underclass to improve their lot can be traced to Oscar Lewis, the scholarly debate has been focused rather myopically on the work of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in their seminal tract, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, and other writings. Glazer and Moynihan argued that continuing Black deprivation was a function largely of Black cultural deficiencies resulting from centuries of slavery and racial discrimination. In the optimistic light of the postwar civil rights legislation, Glazer and Moynihan interpreted the ongoing Black migration to Northern cities as similar to the earlier migration of European immigrant groups. For these theorists, 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.

By contrast, rather than seeing Black Americans as having shared an urban experience similar to, if somewhat more difficult than, that experienced by the wide variety of European immigrants, the radical scholars see Blacks, and in some instances other racially distinct groups such as American Indians, as having been the victims of internal “colonialism.” Race prejudice thoroughly shut these communities out of the most important opportunities and deprived them—through legal, cultural, and economic discrimination—of their ability to compete for opportunities on an equal basis against whites. For these scholars, ethnic whites may have participated in competition with each other, but the boundaries that separated them with regard to residential communities, marriage, political power, and employment were far more permeable than the racial boundary that excluded Blacks. From this perspective, it is the “color line,” the disenfranchisement
of Black Americans, that is the most fundamental and enduring fact of America's group life in the twentieth century, not the marginally significant cultural distinctions among white ethnic groups.

The disastrous implications of radical scholarship in terms of American Jewish history can be seen in the work of the prominent sociologist Stephen Steinberg. Professor Steinberg has devoted the better part of his twenty-five-year career to proving that the importance given to culture and ethnicity in explaining social stratification among American ethnic groups is all part of an elaborate racist myth. In his highly regarded 1989 book The Ethnic Myth, Steinberg set out to prove that the success of white ethnic groups in such areas as politics, industry, labor, and education has been far more attributable to favorable social and economic circumstances than to anything having to do with cultural habits, customs, or beliefs. For example, Steinberg insists 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.”7 For Steinberg, not only were distinctive ethnic cultures relatively insignificant for the advancement of white ethnic groups, but the variations in economic and social mobility between white ethnic groups owed almost nothing to cultural attitudes. In an earlier book, The Academic Melting Pot, Steinberg argued that the differences in the levels of success achieved by Italian Catholics and Jews in higher education through the 1970s were due primarily to the highly disparate social and economic experiences of both immigrant groups, rather than to distinctive group attitudes toward education. Accordingly, while Russian Jews had “rich intellectual traditions, it is also true that... they were heavily concentrated in middle-class occupations,” which fostered an absorption of the middle-class respect for education. By contrast, Southern Italians were antagonistic toward education because they came to America as peasants tied to the soil, with limited expectations for advancement. In other words, American Jews “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.”8

Scholars like Steinberg make no secret of the motivation behind their efforts to virtually extinguish ethnic culture as a significant factor in explaining America's ethnoracial hierarchy. These efforts stem from the conviction that white racism is an enduring and immutable feature of American
life that can be combated only by the permanent institution of racial preferences. Whereas earlier in the century social scientists had used the presumed biological inferiority of Blacks as a way to excuse white racism, many radical scholars feel that today the explanation of cultural deficiency is used by some social scientists, and others in the sphere of public policy, to excuse persistent white racism.

That Steinberg has had the expansion of affirmative action on his mind all along is evinced in a later volume in which he finally reveals the ultimate goal behind denying the importance of cultural differences in American life. Steinberg’s attempt to prove that Blacks continue to face a unique and debilitating level of discrimination in *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Politics* is apparently motivated by his perception that the system of race preferences is under attack. Reflecting the extreme cultural relativism that informs so much of the literature on race today, Steinberg admits that he is deeply offended by suggestions that certain groups possess cultural traits that result in greater economic success than certain other groups. There is something wrong with presupposing that “we have qualities that they are lacking,” Steinberg insists, and his logic for doing so is simple. If it can be shown that all white European immigrant groups had more or less equal access to economic opportunities from which Blacks were excluded, then the present system of compensatory treatment based on race is made, not only more palatable, but necessary and just. It is not an accident, then, that this effort to erase the cultural distinctiveness of white ethnic groups has occasionally emphasized American Jews. It is the Jews, after all, who stand out in the public conscience as having the strongest claim to historical victimization and whose affluence appears to have defied what structural determinists like Steinberg predict should happen when people are deprived of opportunities for advancement. If it is possible to prove not only that Jews received certain advantages not available to Blacks but that the privileges accruing to those with white skin were the primary catalyst for Jewish advancement, it would go a long way toward justifying racial preferences.

Central to the effort to “whiten” the American Jewish experience has been the denial of Jewish exceptionalism, the idea that the Jewish experience in America has been unique. The remarkable economic advance of Jews into the middle and upper classes has inspired a number of observers over the years to conclude that Jewish culture seems to have been exceptionally well disposed to the American ideals of universalism, equality, individualism, and free markets. Almost half a century ago, the sociologist
Robert Park, speaking of the industry, enterprise, and individual drive of America's Jews, recommended that Jewish culture and history be taught in public schools so that there would be a more complete understanding of American values. More recently, the renowned historian of race and slavery David Brion Davis has suggested that American Jewish history provides a test case for the values of a meritocracy, a society in which the distribution of rewards and penalties takes place according to the character and capabilities of individuals. In his landmark study *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon wrote "The rise in socio-economic status of the Eastern European Jews and their descendants . . . [is] the greatest collective Horatio Alger story in American immigration history." At least on the surface, then, as Robert Park suggested, American Jews are unique in that they are the group that has most fully realized the "American Dream" and that has absorbed the values of individualism, equality, freedom, and enterprise to the point where it could be said of them that they are like all other Americans—only more so.

But the radical attack on culture as an explanation for ethnic mobility now demands a frontal assault on the idea of Jewish exceptionalism. Karen Brodkin Sacks has attempted to show 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. Taking her cue from Steinberg, Sacks argues in her article "How the Jews Became White Folks" that Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century had timed their move to the United States to meet rising labor needs. Even the remarkable Jewish success in higher education beginning in the 1920s, Sacks insists, was a result not of cultural values but of the combination of revised college curriculums and the Jews' good fortune in having to compete academically almost exclusively against homework-shirking white Protestants. "In a setting where disparagement of intellectual pursuits and the gentleman's 'C' were badges of distinction, it was not hard for Jews to excel," writes Sacks. The postwar economic boom, which was accompanied by massive government programs like the G.I. Bill of Rights and Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance, were largely responsible for the mobility of Jews and other "Euro-ethnics" in the postwar period, according to Sacks. Because of changing racial attitudes precipitated by the war against fascism, Jews and other ethnic groups became newly accepted entrants into the category of "white Americans," fully eligible to enjoy the rights and privileges accruing thereto. While racial attitudes were changing, Blacks
were still prevented from taking part in many of the opportunities of the
postwar economy, which were effectively "Jim Crowed." While Sacks does
not bother to determine if Jews benefited from racially exclusionary gov­
ernment programs any more or any less than other groups of whites, this
oversight does not prevent her from labeling these programs "affirmative
action" for all white males or from lumping Jews together with other
whites as equal partners in a white opportunity pool. "Jews' and other
white ethnics' upward mobility was the result of programs that allowed us
to float on a rising economic tide," writes Sacks.16 So, the story goes, the
miraculous timing that characterized the Jewish migration to the United
States at the turn of the century sustained itself virtually throughout the
postwar period, as Jews were fortuitously well situated to take advantage
of postwar prosperity and changing racial attitudes. Jews, like all other white
ethnic groups, were essentially passive players and furtive beneficiaries of a
century of increasing economic wealth and government good cheer.

There is obviously a lot to be said for the view that Blacks, at least until
very recently, have been deprived of numerous rights and privileges avail­
able to Americans of European descent. It is also no secret that many im­
migrants from Europe not only discovered the social, economic, and po­
litical value of having white skin upon their arrival in the United States but
in fact became contaminated by native racist bigotry as well. Yet, a number
of important and troubling questions come to mind when considering the
radical critique of race relations and of Jewish mobility in particular, mostly
having to do with the extent to which cultural values shape external con­
ditions and the extent to which they are a product of those conditions. For
example, while the prior possession of industrial skills may explain some of
the unusually rapid economic success of immigrant Jews, is this sufficient in
itself to explain the remarkably broad range of Jewish achievement in such
diverse fields as retail trade, the film industry, high finance, physics, jour­
nalism, fiction writing, medicine, law, theater, the composition of popular
music, and even organized crime? Moreover, do the skills possessed by
Jews, which were allegedly so helpful to their advance in the industrializing
United States of the late nineteenth century, also account for the rapid ad­
vance of Jewish migrants to other, less well developed economies like those
of South America?17 Other pertinent questions come to mind as well. If
Blacks were so completely shut out of postwar affluence, how does one ex­
plain that the greatest economic gains for Blacks relative to whites occurred
in the 1940s and 1960s and that by 1966 the gap between Blacks and whites
on a whole range of socioeconomic measures, including home ownership,
had been substantially narrowed? 18 To what extent did the vast expansion, in the 1960s, of government antipoverty programs aimed at Blacks compensate for discrimination in older postwar government programs? Finally, if whiteness alone explains the more rapid advance of European ethnics, how does this square with the rapid mobility of certain other nonwhite groups, including Caribbean Blacks? 19

For our purposes, however, the most troublesome aspect of the radical view of race and culture is its failure to recognize anything distinct about the Jewish experience in America, and this handicap operates in at least one area that is perhaps even more consequential than Jewish mobility. Just as the imperative of the color line has necessitated the historical reconstruction of Jewish economic mobility to fit the categories of white skin privilege, so, too, has there been a need to “normalize,” or “whiten,” what seems to be unusual Jewish political behavior. Quite simply, at least as much as their unusual economic mobility, American Jews appear to have been exceptional in their historical adherence to the traditions of modern liberalism, a liberalism that includes such values as individual freedom, equality of opportunity, universal education, and the belief that government should soften the rough edges of private markets. Obviously, it would be a mistake to attribute a monolithic liberalism to American Jews. Highly pluralistic throughout modern history, Jews have been “Tories, Confederates, and Know-Nothings as well as Socialists, Progressives and liberal Democrats.” 20 But the persistence of a widespread liberalism among American Jews has resulted in political behavior, particularly on social welfare issues, that seems nothing short of, well, exceptional. The rise of modern Jewish liberalism during the New Deal years of the 1930s seemed, at the time, to coincide with Jewish working class interests, and so therefore not particularly “exceptional.” But, after World War II, as Jews rapidly moved out of the working class and left the immigrant ghettos behind, they maintained their liberalism. 21 As two prominent sociologists recently concluded, “while Jews earn more than any ethnoreligious group for whom data exist (including Episcopalians), they are more liberal to left in their opinions than other white groups, and they vote like Hispanics.” 22 While the nature of Jewish liberalism may now be evolving, recent polls indicate that, more than any other group of comparable socioeconomic status, Jews continue to cling to the values of equality and the welfare state. 23 Jews continue to show a preference for higher government spending on the poor, gun control, freer immigration, a woman’s right to abortion, and tax increases as a way of reducing the government deficit, and they oppose government
spending cuts. Essentially, as one sociologist recently wrote, "political allegiance in the United States is affected most strongly by economic status—but Jews break the pattern." There has been considerable speculation as to the causes of the Jewish attraction to liberalism. Some have seen the wellspring of American Jewish liberalism in the values of the Torah, in which the high regard for Zedakah (literally "righteousness"), learning, and nonasceticism appear to be reflected in Jewish respect for welfare, education spending, and government interventionism in general. Others have interpreted Jewish liberalism as the twentieth-century extension of the response to European emancipation, which originated with the left and was opposed by the predominantly anti-Semitic right. Another interpretation has it that the liberalism of most second- and third-generation American Jews stems from lingering feelings of marginality. But, whatever the emphasis, central to any explanation of American Jewish liberalism is the Jewish experience of vulnerability in the lands of the diaspora, which has served to foster the belief among contemporary Jews that wealth and income are perhaps not the most important elements to consider when pondering Jewish well-being. That is, being a religious minority with a unique history of persecution and vulnerability has imbued Jews with a more conscious recognition that the values of individual freedom, merit-based advance, political and religious liberty, and civic equality are matters of paramount importance, even more so than marginal economic gain.

These attitudes have been reflected in Jewish attitudes toward Blacks. There remains little doubt that Jewish interest in Black affairs was strengthened after 1915, the year a Jew named Leo Frank was lynched by a Georgia mob after being falsely convicted of raping and murdering a fourteen-year-old employee of his family's pencil factory. The uncommon sympathy American Jews seemed to take on for Black Americans in the wake of the Frank lynching reflected the concerns of the recently arrived Eastern European Jews, who had suffered similar kinds of mob violence. There were, to be sure, a number of instances in which certain other ethnic groups before World War II, still victimized by various levels of discrimination, saw parallels between themselves and Black Americans and rejected an identity based on "whiteness." Thus, Poles in Chicago generally saw the post–World War I race riots there as an affair between whites and Blacks that did not involve them. Italian immigrants in Louisiana mixed socially and culturally with Blacks at the turn of the century and were clearly
distinguished from Southern whites. Similar examples of immigrant group-
Black amity exist for Greek immigrants in Gary, Indiana, the Chinese in
Mississippi, and the Irish of the early 1820 and 1830 migrations. But these
instances of immigrant group-Black solidarity were subplots against the
more common theme in which immigrants and native Blacks generally saw
each other, for a host of complicated and unfortunate reasons, as rivals for
the common goal of full citizenship. After 1915 it appeared that American
Jews were alone among American ethnic groups in seeking out similarities
between themselves and Black Americans, and, at least in elite circles, in
mobilizing politically around an alliance with Black Americans. As one
scholar recently put it, the Frank lynching “ultimately eclipsed all of the
frantic distancing strategies intended to mark off the boundaries between
the two groups.” Jews and Jewish organizations during this period con-
tributed heavily to organizations such as the National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and to dozens of other phil-
anthropic projects designed to help Blacks, including the funding of Black
education in the South. Major Jewish figures like Julius Rosenwald, Jacob
Schiff, and Felix Warburg contributed to dozens of Black elementary and
vocational schools and institutions of higher and professional education,
hospitals, orphanages, libraries, settlement houses, and social clubs. Of all
Black school children in the South, it is estimated that at one time 25 to
40 percent were educated in schools constructed with funds from Julius
Rosenwald, the Jewish magnate of Sears Roebuck fame.

But the need to extinguish cultural deficiencies as an explanation for
Black poverty and to augment the explanatory power of white racism has
necessitated the reconfiguration of the Jewish posture toward Black Amer-
icans as typical white exploitation and self-promotion. This revisionism has
by now a long tradition, beginning with some prominent figures associated
with the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. Black Power sought
to remove whites from the civil rights struggle and to consolidate Black
leadership within the movement. As Jews made up a disproportionately
large segment of the liberal civil rights leadership, the struggle to achieve
the destruction of the integrated civil rights movement necessarily included
an effort to vilify Jewish activism. Harold Cruse spearheaded this attack in
his 1967 volume, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, in which he argued that
Jews, be they in the Communist party of the 1930s, the interracial civil
rights coalition of the postwar decades, or the social sciences, had become
a huge problem for Blacks precisely because they had so identified with
the Black struggle. While Cruse did not concern himself with the question of why Jews tended to identify so strongly with Black causes, he insisted that Jewish involvement in interracial politics "has further complicated this emergence of Afro-American ethnic consciousness." For Cruse, as well as for other Black power theorists and activists, the role of American Jews as "political mediator" between Blacks and whites was "fraught with serious dangers to all concerned" and must be "terminated by Negroes themselves." 37

While Cruse's rhetoric may have put off some moderates, his thesis, essentially that Jewish support for Black equality has been deleterious to Black Americans, has exhibited an impressive amount of staying power. Most recently, the political scientist Andrew Hacker has argued that Jewish involvement in racial matters amounted to an "ego trip" in which Blacks were reduced to junior partners 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." 38 Thus, in the view of some, has the historic Jewish contribution to civil rights become no more noble than a lynching bee.

Other prominent scholars have traveled a far more circuitous route to arrive at similar conclusions. Speaking of the civil rights alliance of Blacks and Jews between the years 1910 and the early 1930s, the Pulitzer prize-winning historian David Levering Lewis argues that both Jewish and Black leadership were dominated by assimilationists, joined together in the common cause of maintaining their dominance within their respective groups. The migrating hordes of East European Jews and poor Southern Blacks to Northern cities concerned elite German Jewish and "talented-tenth" Black leaders, who feared that the less refined newcomers would exacerbate white nativism and racism and botch their program of assimilation. For Lewis, it was not a common history of oppression that resulted in good will on the part of Jews but merely self-interest. "It seems evident that what Jewish and Afro-American elites principally shared was not a similar history but an identical adversary—a species of white gentile. Theirs was a politically determined kinship, a defensive alliance, cemented more from the outside than from within." 39 Like Harold Cruse before him, Lewis insists that this opportunistic alliance served Jewish purposes far better than Black purposes, as it allowed Jews to fight against discrimination by using Blacks as surrogates. Ultimately, the alliance pigeonholed Blacks into an "unworkable paradigm of success," an acceptance of a set of social and political rules by
which Jews would be permitted to advance but by which Blacks would not.40

By interpreting the Jewish concern for equal rights during the interwar years as the narrow, self-serving project of assimilating Jewish elites, Lewis ignores what appears to have been an almost universal preoccupation with the condition of Blacks on the part of Jews, a fixation that included the overt friendliness toward Blacks of predominantly Jewish labor unions and the virtual outpouring of sympathy from most large-circulation Anglo-Jewish and Yiddish periodicals and newspapers.41 These are inconvenient items for revisionist historians like Lewis, who would apparently rather surrender the complexities of American ethnic history to the more pressing need to prove the uniformity of white racism. For these writers, American Jews are problematic because their unique empathy with Black Americans, stemming from the historically ambiguous relationship of Jews to power, appears to threaten the integrity of the all-important color line.

Unfortunately, it is not at all difficult to see that 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, Tony Martin, and others are most interested in proving the moral inferiority of white people and therefore share with radical scholars a “Jewish problem” relating to the ambiguity of Jewish racial identity. Having simultaneously benefited from democracy and enlightenment, yet having suffered, in some instances unspeakably, at the hands of the Western world—of being, in the parlance of contemporary race discourse, neither “Black” or “white”—Jews represent a threat to the crude dichotomy of white “sin” and Black “virtue” that informs the worldview of both radical scholars and Black extremists. It is for this reason that the particular anti-Semitism coming from Black anti-Semites mostly concerns itself with ensuring the “whiteness,” or the empowerment, of the Jews—“Jews in Hollywood conspire to degrade Blacks,” “Jews ran the slave trade,” “Jews have their hands around the throat of the federal government.” While one must not confuse the blatant racism of a Farrakhan or a Jeffries with the more nuanced, socially constructed racial hierarchies of Lewis and Steinberg, it is not difficult to see that the objectives of the extremists and the radical scholars have converged at the point of totalizing Black oppression.

One need only look at the extent to which some of the most dubious claims about Jews have been used to chart the direction of recent historical research to confirm the common objectives of the extremists and the acad-
Jewish performers took in "blacking up," Rogin sets out in Jewish performers too k i n "blackin g up, " Rogi n set s ou t i n
American historians identify as one of the most important areas for future study the role of Jews in the slave trade of Holland, France, England, and Newport, Rhode Island, as well as their role in the plantation system of the South. In the realm of popular culture, the 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, as other scholars have suggested, but to accentuate their whiteness, demonstrate their superiority to Blacks, and gain acceptance in the Hollywood melting pot when Blacks could not. Disregarding the risk that socially marginal Jewish performers took in "blacking up," Rogin sets out in Black Face, White Noise to “untie the knot” that hides the Jewish dominance of a racist mass culture behind Jewish liberalism and to reveal “their own stain of shame.” Rogin is joined in his efforts by the historian Jeffrey Melnick, who suggests that the involvement of both Jews and Blacks in the development of popular music was anything but a harmonious, cross-cultural enterprise. Attacking the claim that Jewish suffering gave Jews an affinity for the tonalities of Black music, 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 from Black musicians and critics that Jews in the music business played an important role in paving the way for mainstream acceptance of Black culture, Melnick concludes that “while both Jews and African Americans contributed to the rhetoric of musical affinity, the fruits of this labor belonged primarily to the former.” Even the work of certain Jewish scientists concerning racial groups is not safe from the academic onslaught. One scholar has set out to show that the Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas, widely credited with the largest role in eviscerating the scientific racism of the nineteenth century, subscribed in substantial degree to white racist views on Black capabilities.

The extent to which some historians are willing to go to portray Jews as progenitors of the white racist tradition is exhibited in an essay by the acclaimed historian of civil rights Taylor Branch. In his 1992 essay “Blacks and Jews: The Uncivil War,” Branch strains credulity in trying to document that American Jews have been “perpetrators of racial hate” but is
forced to look outside the American context to the state of Israel for his evidence. In the mid-1980s, Branch claims, three thousand members of a sect of Black Jews from Chicago under the leadership of Ben-Ami Carter were denied citizenship under the Israeli Law of Return because of anti-Black sentiment among Israelis. But the authenticity of Carter’s claim that he and his followers were indeed Jewish is open to investigation, as are the claims of all those seeking Israeli citizenship under that country’s Law of Return, particularly Jewish converts. It is true that the question of “who is a Jew” is a heated topic in the Jewish world, but Branch’s imputation that Carter and his followers were not given immediate citizenship because they were Black seems baseless, particularly in light of Israel’s successful airlift of thousands of Ethiopian Jews in the early 1990s. More important, like the issues of Jews involved in the slave trade, of Hollywood’s “Jewish” racism, and of Franz Boas’s views on race capabilities, it is difficult to ascertain the usefulness of these approaches, except as they serve to erase the Jewish fog that obscures the color line in American race history.

The trouble with revisionist race history is not that all of its claims are false. Jewish involvement in Black affairs, to be sure, has never been devoid of self-interest. Liberal Jewish civil rights activists have often been the most vocal in claiming that helping Blacks was good for the Jews. Nor is the attempt to “whiten” Jewish history purely a matter of historical impropriety, particularly in the American context, where oppression has not been at the center of the Jewish experience. Aside from erasing the truly admirable record Jews have amassed on racial matters, the fundamental problem with the revisionist history is that it denies American Jewish exceptionalism and therefore leads to the assumption that Jewish “whiteness” vis-à-vis Black Americans has always been advantageous from the standpoint of American Jews. By denying the reality of a unique Jewish past, and, therefore, its impact on Jewish identity in the United States, the revisionist history fails to recognize the incongruence between the liberal accommodation Jews made with America and the reality of American Jewish life. While prior histories by authors like Lewis and Cruse speak to what they believe has been the negative impact of the relationship on Blacks, no one has ever explored the possibility that the Jewish involvement with the Black struggle for equality may, in certain instances, not have been beneficial for Jews. What, the unanswered question now seems to be, does the Jewish posture toward race and Black Americans, as an integral component of American Jewish liberalism, tell us about the Jews as a distinct cultural group? Specifically, it needs to be determined whether the
persistence of a widespread liberalism among American Jews has resulted in attitudes toward Blacks and issues of racial equality that are consonant with the interests of all the various and sundry communities that constitute American Jewry.

What needs to be observed more carefully in this respect is the tenuous place Jews occupy in American history relative to the centrality of Blacks in that history. Black Americans are, after all, the “omni-Americans,” a people whose experience is at once defined by and defining of the American experience. Black group consciousness and identity begins (and, many would argue, ends) in America. On the master-occupied slave plantations of the South, most of which kept small numbers of slaves, African cultural idioms such as voodoo and witchcraft gave way to distinctively Black American cultural expressions, fashioned over time by creative responses to slavery and oppression. This is not to say that some of these cultural adjustments, such as in song and dance, cannot be traced to Africa but only to assert that the “Africanness” of these traits was transformed by the peculiarly American context of the slave experience. Over time, Blacks eventually adopted even the Christian faith of the relatively homogenous Protestant culture into which they were brought.47 Thus, Blacks were able to devise a distinctive Black American culture, based on common African origins but drawing almost exclusively from American sources.48 Perhaps this is why the transnational quest for a Black identity, even as embodied by the largest Black Nationalist movement, led by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, has failed to move beyond America’s borders in any tangible way.49 Perhaps it is also why American culture draws from the Black experience almost as much as Black culture draws on the American experience. The two are intertwined and inseparable. As the Black writer Albert Murray has written, “American culture . . . is . . . incontestably mulatto. Indeed, for all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called Black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.”50 The Black American, therefore, despite the long history of segregation and exclusion, is always and forever present in the American drama, reminding white America of its imperfect past and pressing the formidable weight of Black history upon the American conscience as a reminder that there has always been an “other” in its midst, different yet somehow remarkably familiar.

What, then, can be made of the claim for American Jewish exceptionalism, for the assumption that Jewish values are “quintessentially” American, that American Jews are like all other Americans, only more so? Jewish
history, after all, is transnational, beginning long before the advent of the United States and far beyond its borders. The modern Jews’ search for identity began in Europe, and the awful transgressions that bear so formidably on Jewish consciousness owe almost nothing to the American experience. The key to understanding the exceptional nature of American Jews, and the manifestations of this exceptionalism in the realms of economic mobility and political liberalism, lies in the extent to which the integration-survival dilemma pervades the Jews’ collective conscience. For the majority of American Jews, most of whose descendants came from premodern Eastern Europe, it was the United States that offered to them the Enlightenment’s “brutal bargain” of acceptance into civil society at the price of a submerged cultural distinctiveness. The promise for American Jews in the twentieth century was that Jews, on condition of conformity to American cultural and political norms, would be treated as individuals like everyone else. The temptation was intense. Since Jews were strangers in Europe before they came to the United States, and inevitably the opportunities for emancipation were greeted by them with considerably more enthusiasm than they were by other immigrant groups that had never been completely excluded from the social and political life of their lands of origin.

On the other hand, in coming to the United States, other ethnic groups had made a conscious break with their pasts, while the Jews, whose ethnic and religious identity were bound together and not limited by geography, made no such conscious break. The act of leaving one’s country of origin for Jews did not necessarily constitute stepping out of one’s history. While a number of American immigrant groups retained strong nationalistic feelings for their mother country, the Jews were unique in that they came to the United States with an internalized national culture of the spirit, not necessarily threatened or weakened by the act of moving from one country to another. This dynamic resulted in what one sociologist has labeled the “ambivalent American Jew,” a figure consumed by a conflicting desire for both acceptance and difference. Knowing that the United States bore no responsibility for Jewish history and so offered the Jews no special quarter, Jews set about adjusting their Jewishness to American life, and the connecting link for Americanization was liberalism.

It is through this connecting link that the historian Hasia Diner locates Jewish involvement in the Black American struggle for equality. As Diner has explained, the unique history of Jewish persecution bound Jews to the American ideals of equality and freedom far more intensely than even the
“real Americans” and thus made it possible for Jews to carve out a place for themselves in American life by helping Blacks.57 Liberalism and involvement in Black affairs was, in large measure, an accommodation of Judaism and the Jewish past to American life.

But an important question arises as to how effective this accommodation has been for Jews, who now find themselves living in a nation that, due to the enormity of the Black experience, has become defined by the racial division between white and Black, or perhaps between white and “non-white.” In one historian’s estimate, “Liberalism has served Jews well in their quest for a secure American identity, but that has less to do with Judaism than with the imperatives of Americanization . . . liberalism has been the preeminent ideology of acculturation.”58

Blacks in America had never seriously been offered the “brutal bargain” offered to the Jews, having been disenfranchised for most of their history. Even when Black Americans were legally enfranchised in the early 1960s, it was never fully expected that their distinctiveness would disappear or that Americans would be able to erase the memories and scars resulting from the nation’s sordid past. This situation has provided Black Americans with certain cultural and political advantages. As Gerald David Jaynes and Robin Williams write in their book A Common Destiny, “the long history of discrimination and segregation produced among Blacks a heightened sense of group consciousness and a stronger orientation toward collective values and behavior than exists generally among Americans.”59 Despite vast and growing differences between the Black middle and lower classes in recent decades, Blacks continue to show a remarkable degree of solidarity based on what is perceived to be a shared experience of oppression. The psychologist Ellis Cose has used the term “Black rage” to describe the sense of outrage that many in the Black middle class share with their poorer brethren.60 Despite the large number of Black leaders and intellectuals who have tried to articulate a unifying theme for a Black identity free from the spirit of radical racial protest, the iron cage of historical white racism and its institutional “correction” in the system of race preferences today, has served as the central organizing principle for the Black community, even as white racism itself has receded.61

American Jews, by contrast, are a “people divided.”62 As early as the 1920s, the religious divisions among American Jews had become permanent, with second-generation Jews adopting various modes of secularization in their efforts to obtain acceptance. The Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism, by the 1930s all distinctly sep-
While 4.4 million people claim to practice some form of Judaism, as many vitality, seems to continue unabated. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found that 52 percent of Jews who married after 1985 married non-Jewish partners. Sixty to 70 percent, or 3.5 million of America’s 5.5 million Jews, are unaffiliated, belong to no synagogue, and, in most cases, do not hold membership in any Jewish organization or institution. Recent polls show that the connection of young American Jews to Israel, which for a short time acted as the glue that held American Jewry together, is rapidly eroding.

To some degree, the cultural problems of the Jewish community must be seen within the context of societal divisions that have afflicted the totality of American life since the 1960s, problems that are invariably related to the “culture wars”: the triumphalism of the religious right, the declining appeal of liberal religion, and the continued assimilation of white ethnic groups. Yet the very reaction of American Jewish organizations to Judaism’s cultural dilemma indicates that Jews in America face some unique difficulties. While a 52 percent rate of exogamous marriage would not so much as raise an eyebrow among other white ethnic groups, groups that have experienced out-marriage rates upward of 70 and 80 percent for two decades or more, the NJPS has been a clarion call for America’s Jews. The Long Island Jewish World stated recently that “virtually every organization and academic program on the communal map has announced new studies or programs involving their particular search for the alchemy of continuity.” As one Jewish sociologist commented on the cultural crisis within American Judaism, “the despair and confusion of American Jewry in the face of this crisis has no parallel in other religious communities.”

The kind of cultural dissolution that currently afflicts American Jews has not generally been a factor in Black life. Blacks have achieved a certain amount of success in institutionalizing the idea of Black marginalization and in extending to themselves certain advantages accruing to a contemporary racialized American scene. Whatever else the ubiquitous reminders of Black victimization might mean for Black economic mobility, social integration, and race relations, winning official confirmation of collective status through race-based governmental programs, open college admissions, Black electoral districts, “Afro-centric” school curricula, corporate hiring
preferences, government set-asides, and private and not-for-profit foundation support has assured Blacks a powerful form of racial identity. Black Americans have utilized, with impressive effectiveness, the special place they occupy in United States history in order to develop a cultural unity that has, for the most part, escaped American Jews.

Knowing that their claims to special treatment in the United States are not strong, American Jews have not generally sought this kind of official support for their own group solidarity and have failed on their own to define new cultural forms capable of securing Jewish communal sustenance. The identification with the Black struggle for equality, rooted in the memory of Jewish suffering but not in the reality of contemporary Jewish life, has prevented Jews from seeing that they are not integral to American life and culture, as Black Americans and Black culture appear to be, and that their own collective needs may, at various historical junctures, be more pressing than the Black need for social redress. For whatever else the Black fight for racial equality 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. For all the freedom and opportunity the United States has offered citizens of Jewish background, it may ultimately prove to be a place far more conducive to the development and maintenance of a strong Black identity than of a strong Jewish one. Many commentators, attempting to explain the cause of Black anti-Semitism, continue to believe that Jews have made it socially and economically in the United States and that this success evokes envy in Blacks. But this long-held assumption needs re-thinking in light of recent developments. Is it not the Jews who, as the twentieth century winds down, have a great deal to envy about Blacks? Has not the American Jew replaced the Black American as this nation’s true “invisible man?”

This Book and a Word about “Who Is a Jew”

Chapter 1 of this book discusses the geographic division between Jews living in the South and Jewish organizations and leaders in the North over the issue of racial desegregation in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision striking down the doctrine of “separate but equal” facilities in the nation’s public schools. The revulsion of American Jews against racial big-
otry and the belief that Jewish well-being is tied to the cause of Black equality made it impossible for many Jewish leaders to empathize with the very real threats to Jewish communities in the South stemming from overt support of radical desegregation. The inability of Northern Jewish leaders to see that Jews, before the battle for desegregation, were not generally victims in the South and that the racial caste system in the South situated Jews favorably in the Southern mind, or "whitened" them, was an early warning that American Jewish leaders and intellectuals, when it came to the race issue, would continue to respond to memory and self-image more than to the reality of Jewish life in modern America.

Chapter 2 looks at the response of Jewish leaders and intellectuals in the North to the shift in the civil rights struggle from the South to the North in the late 1950s and early 1960s. By this time, increasing affluence and suburbanization made residential community and proximity, along with participation in secular Jewish organizations, the strongest forms of identity for many Jews living in the urban metropolis. Yet most Jewish critics intensified their calls for racial integration in residential communities, schools, and communal institutions, despite the potential danger to these vital forms of Jewish communal sustenance.

The issue of Black writers and critics in the New York Intellectual community in the late 1950s and early 1960s is explored in chapter 3. Perhaps no other identifiable group of American Jews has so exemplified the Jewish push to succeed and to gain recognition, and to do so without the debilitating attachment to Jewish tradition, as the coterie of mostly Jewish intellectuals that coalesced around *Partisan Review* in the 1930s. Sons and daughters of immigrants, the New York Intellectuals held up individual freedom and urban cosmopolitanism as the highest ideals and set about building a modernist and staunchly anti-Communist high culture in the United States. While the issue of race was not paramount for most New York Intellectuals, there were several New York writers whose work on race became emblematic of their general approach to art, culture, society, and, of course, Jewishness.

By most historical accounts, the rise of Black Power, the attack on liberal integrationism, and the 1967 Six-Day War in the Middle East changed the dynamics of the relationship between Blacks and Jews in the United States. A number of well-publicized confrontations between these two groups, symbolized most dramatically by the New York City teacher's strike of 1968, resulted in the widespread impression that the stated Jewish interest in strengthening the system of individual advance by merit was incompati-
ible with growing Black demands for a redistribution of power and resources. But an analysis of the statements of Jewish leaders and intellectuals who became actively engaged in the race issue between 1967 and 1972 indicates that a large number found a great deal to sympathize with in the Black Power movement. Many Jewish leaders and intellectuals sided with the new radicalism, urged understanding of Black demands for such policies as community control and racial preferences, and insisted, against the view of Black Power leaders, that Jews were still victims who belonged on the side of the Black oppressed. Central to this more radical position among Jewish leaders and intellectuals was the frequent comparison between Zionism and Black Power. It is in this period that the truly integral nature of the attachment of many Jewish leaders and intellectuals to the Black struggle for equality is revealed in its most blatant forms.

At this time, some Jewish leaders and intellectuals articulated a more conservative approach to Black Power. Chapter 5 of this book looks at the position of some conservative elements in the orthodox Jewish community; conservative segments of poorer, more religiously observant working-class Jews and the Jewish Defense League; and the former Jewish radicals, many associated with the New York Intellectual milieu, who helped pioneer the neoconservative movement in the United States. Neoconservatism was the largest and most influential politically conservative movement among secular Jews in the postwar era, and this book ends with its arrival in 1972. With the Jewish neoconservatives, the full range of contemporary Jewish positions on race, all of which in one way or another remained mired in the discourse of liberalism, had been fully articulated.

An intellectual history that concerns itself with how American Jews think on any topic inevitably becomes bogged down in the questions of "who is a Jew" and what is and what is not "Jewish" about their views. Since American Jews are involved in almost every walk of modern life, they are often possessed of multiple identities. In the postwar period, for instance, throngs of social scientists of Jewish birth have written on the issue of race relations. It seems axiomatic to declare the work of the majority of these authors inappropriate for inclusion in this book, as the authors themselves would no doubt insist that their work is a product of the commitment to the evaluative standards of modern social science and not to their "Jewishness." Certainly, an argument could be made that the commitment of so many Jewish scholars to "objective" social science speaks volumes about the "Jewishness" of these authors, and indeed an argument about the nature of the "Jewish" attraction to objective social science is
advanced in chapter 2. But, in general, it has not been my purpose to
deconstruct texts or to speculate as to the underlying psychological motives
of writers of Jewish birth. In order to avoid an undue amount of projection
and reliance on innuendo, the most liberal definition of who is an Amer-
ican Jew and whose thought, therefore, constitutes a valid primary source
for inclusion in this analysis has been employed. For the most part, anybody
who claims to be Jewish, has lived in the United States for most of his or
her professional life, and is writing about Blacks or any issue pertaining to
Black Americans, is considered a valid primary source for the purposes of
this book. The claim to Jewishness can take many forms in addition to a
statement to such effect within a particular text or speech. If an author is
of Jewish birth and is writing for a specifically Jewish publication or for
the sake of a Jewish audience, his or her work is considered fair game for
analysis.

There is no doubt that, in a study of this magnitude, there will be
important omissions. No single volume can capture the entire universe of
Jewish thought on any issue. All that an author can hope for is that the
dominant strains, trends, and characteristics of a particular historical topic
can be illuminated and interpreted in an honest and open manner. The
reader, of course, will be the judge of whether this objective has been
achieved.