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Why Did “Anti-Semitism” Decline in the United States?

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2009 - Juin 2009 No. 15 - English - Theory/Théorie -

Date de mise en ligne : Wednesday 3 June 2009

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Anti-Semitism has existed in the United States since the first European settlements in North America [1], but it was not until the late nineteenth century and the immigration of relatively large numbers of Jews that they could be focused upon as a dangerous presence. It can even be said that the radical Protestantism allowed to develop in relative isolation in the British colonies in North America bore an affinity with Jewish eschatology that mitigated anti-Semitic expression. Certainly the Roman Catholic Church was considered a far greater danger than Judaism. The anti-establishment orientation of Protestantism as it evolved in the colonies was reinforced by the war for independence and fused with the rationalistic rhetoric and ideas of the Enlightenment. The often-repeated conviction that the colonies of North America, and then the United States of America, were collectively the “New Jerusalem” was held by generations of both religious and political leaders.

It was that most enlightened and secular of all founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson who suggested in 1785 that Congress adopt as the great seal of the United States the image of “the children of Israel being led by a shaft of light” coming from heaven. It has been observed that references were frequent to the books of Exodus and Revelations as prophecies for the new “nation” and that the Puritan heritage with its Old Testament references even provided a cultural and ideological foundation that lent an essential specificity to the idea of being American (United-Statesian). [2]

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Holy Land of Palestine exerted a special fascination over Protestants in which Jews figured importantly. In particular, the idea was widespread that the coming of the Messiah would be announced by the restoration of the Jewish people to Palestine. According to Hilton Obenzinger, “Jewish restoration was a vision of social engineering – and repair of the American soul – even grander than the plans for African colonization” [...] “The restoration of the ancient, fallen nation was a powerful trope of emerging nationalism that, because of the close typological identification of the settler-colonial project with the Israelites, was essential to the assertion of American identities.” Not only did this idea coincide with the Calvinistic idea of a special calling for the “elect”, the notion of a special “mission” reserved for the United States was easily incorporated into the chiliastic sects that participated in the periodic “Great Awakenings” in the United States. “The restoration of the Jews, like the restoration of the primitive church, set American sensibilities on a journey inward by means of active intervention, making the creation of the new New World republic a very old endeavor at the same time that it gave the myth of American expansion the quality of a quest toward the central, essential nub of history, a journey back in time to a pure core.” [3] When Herman Melville, in 1849, claimed “We Americans are the peculiar chosen people, the Israel of our time. We bear the ark of the liberties of the world”, he was articulating a widespread belief that still exists.

In this cultural and social context, anti-Semitism had no general social or political utility. On the contrary, identification with the Jewish children of Israel meant that the Jew was not an “other” but rather a precursor of the American Protestant of European origins. If, in times of social distress and political confusion, scapegoats were needed, Native Americans, African Americans and others such as the newly arrived Irish or Germans served very well. Just as the population of the newly created United States escaped, in great part, the survival of feudal social relations and the patterns of deference and resentment that tend to survive them, the relative absence of a history of anti-Semitism in thought and deed mitigated anti-Jewish attitudes. Only the massive arrival of Jewish people beginning in the 1880s would change this situation.

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The arrival of more than two million Jewish people between 1880 and 1925 contributed to a major re-composition of the population of the United States and significantly changed perceptions of its Jewish component. Throughout the previous history of the country, Jews were few in relative numbers but nevertheless intimately linked to the creation of the republic and its development. In contrast, the new arrivals were masses of Russian and Eastern European refugees who fled from anti-Semitic pogroms or economic difficulties. They were people who differed in terms of social class, economic circumstances and ethnicity from the largely Sephardic Jews who had become citizens at the inception of the republic. In the new conditions, perceptions of Jewish people began to change rapidly.

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Virulent anti-Semitism in the United States began in response to the demographic changes linked to rapid industrialization and the immigration policies facilitating it. Important components of these changes were the social conflicts and political movements challenging establishment ideas and power relationships during the “Progressive Era”. This was a time of the formation of radical and revolutionary organizations of all tendencies and of industrial violence in all its forms. Established elites everywhere reacted in kind. In the industrial centers, the use of police and military forces developed rapidly and with brutality. A revival of the Ku Klux Klan, in the North and well as the South, contributed to the expression of racist sentiments and violence in which Jews figured importantly.

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By 1920, the leading anti-Semite in the United States was the greatly admired Henry Ford who took it upon himself to publish and disseminate worldwide the infamously apocryphal “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. It was Ford who provided Adolf Hitler much of the anti-Semite diatribes the latter recycled in his *Mein Kampf* (1925). During the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Semitism developed strongly in the country, first stimulated by the reactionary political context of the twenties and then by the economic distress and political instability of the thirties. [4] Other than Ford, the Reverend Charles Coughlin, the idolized aviator Charles Lindberg, the political agitator Gerald L. K. Smith (close to the charismatic Huey Long, assassinated in 1935) and others who explained outstanding social problems as consequences of Jewish designs on the country had extensive national support. In brief, encouraged by the rise of fascism in Europe, anti-Semitism took strong root in the United States before the outbreak of the Second World War. Discrimination against Jews took different forms. Along with murder and other barbarous acts in some regions, in more “genteel” milieus the discrimination was more polite, subtle and hypocritical. For example, major universities established quotas limiting the relative numbers of Jews admitted; privileged ethnic elites thusly protected themselves against a “minority” culturally disposed to compete successfully in university studies.

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In spite of the emergence of a far more widespread and perhaps deeper anti-Semitism, a concomitant process of assimilation also conditioned popular perceptions regarding Jews in the 1920s. One of the most important vectors of this dialectic between prejudice and integration can be seen in the contributions of Jewish people to the evolution of American popular music.

Jewish immigration was encouraged in the 1880s by the promise of work in industrializing America, and by murderous pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. In fact, in their countries of origin, the Jews were victims of the same kind of discrimination and brutality known by African Americans in the United States. Although anti-Semitism in most of the United States was not generally as brutal as the racism directed against African Americans or other ethnic groups, the fact that both groups were objects of deep-seated prejudice was nevertheless an affinity between Jews and “black” people. *What follows is taken from Larry Portis, Soul Trains: A Peoples' History of Popular Music in the United States and Britain*, College Station, Virtualbookworm, 2002, pp. 41-48.

It was during the ragtime era that Jewish composers and performers successfully assimilated African-American music and appropriated the blackface minstrel tradition. Their role in the subsequent evolution of American popular music is simply staggering. The importance of the Jewish population of New York City in the development of American show business at the turn of the century is particularly noteworthy. “The Winter Garden audiences—always with a large Jewish element in them—liked the way Jolson inserted the odd Yiddish word into his dialogue, or rather his monologues.... Big Time Show business was very much a Jewish affair.... Not only [Al] Jolson and [George] Jessel, but [Eddy] Cantor and Georgie Price were Jewish. So were the Shuberts. So was Gershwin and Irving Berlin. So was Fanny Brice.” And so were a myriad of other important figures, both on stage and behind the scenes, such as Nora Bayes, the “Empress of Vaudeville” (born Dora Goldberg in Joliet, Illinois in 1880).

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[855.jpg](#)

The most important of these entertainers was Al Jolson. The first American singing idol was born Asa Yoelson in Srednik, Russian Lithuania, in the Russian Pale of Jewish Settlement around 1886. Many of the men in his family were Jewish cantors, singers of holy texts in the synagogues. To escape the bloody pogroms periodically visited upon the Shtetl (rural ghettos) by the Czar's Cossacks, Jolson's father, Moses Yoelson, immigrated to the United States the 1890s. He was followed several years later by the rest of the family.

Jolson's talent was soon recognized. In 1899, around the age of 14, he performed as an extra in a crowd scene in the American premiere of an English play about life in a Jewish ghetto, Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*. He began to sing in blackface in 1904, and in 1908 joined the famous Lew Dockstader's Minstrels. In 1911, he had a major break when he appeared at the end of the Broadway show *La Belle Paree*. In blackface, he sang “Paris Is A Paradise For Coons,” and saved the show from a disastrous debut with the critics (in spite of the fact it was scored by Jerome Kern). By 1912, Jolson was a major star of both stage and records. His persona was well worked out. He used blackface and his Jewish chutzpah to amuse his public and to sing falsely nostalgic songs evoking the American Southland. Ragtime had been vulgarized to please a mass, white audience, and Jolson's success was an indication of how thoroughly white performers had appropriated it. As a consequence, Ragtime's African-American innovators were quickly forgotten and Irving Berlin even dared to bill himself as “The Ragtime King.” In 1918, Jolson opened in *Sinbad*, in which he would sing his greatest hit, “Swanee,” written by George Gershwin, in addition to “Rockabye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody” and “My Mammy.” [5]

As the first superstar of the twentieth century, Jolson's personal experience must be understood in relation to the social and cultural evolution of the United States. Having exploited African-American culture and his own Jewish-ness in his rise to stardom, Jolson remained desperate in his attempts to follow an idealized conception of what an American should be. This impulse was certainly part of his motivation in having his nose reduced in size by cosmetic surgery in 1929.

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There was, however, ample precedent for show business celebrities to modify their physiognomy. Fanny Brice had a much-discussed nose job in 1923. She was even reported as saying that the objective of her operation was “that her nose may return to normalcy,” a statement that prompted New York intellectual Dorothy Parker to observe that the singer had “cut off her nose to spite her race.” See *Barbara W. Grossman, Funny Woman : The Life and Times of Fanny Brice*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, pp. 148-149. In effect, such acts are more than professional career calculations: they indicate pressures to assimilate that stem from ambivalence about one's ethnic or racial origins.

In their own efforts to integrate into American life, Jewish musicians, performers and composers helped bring about an even more dramatic amalgamation: the fusion of African-American and European cultural traditions. Irving Berlin, born Israel Baline in Temun, Russia in 1888, grew-up in the ethnic mosaic of New York City, working as a street singer, as a singing waiter in Irish saloons in Chinatown and as a song plugger. The first song he published was “Marie from Sunny Italy.” His real success began in 1909 with his ragtime compositions “That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune” and “Yiddle on Your Fiddle.” The richness and diversity of the American immigrant population was, as we easily see, fully reflected in Berlin's work. In 1910 he had successes with “Goodbye, Becky Cohen” (sung in Yiddish dialect by burlesque singer Fanny Brice, born Fannie Borach in 1891 in New York City) and “Sweet Italian Love” (written with Ted Snyder).

In 1911, the 23 year old Berlin made musical history with the smash hit “Alexander's Ragtime Band,” popularized by Emma Carus (born in Berlin, Germany in 1879) and Sophie Tucker (born Sophie Kalish in Russia in 1888) (both of whom began their careers as “coon shouters” and ragtime singers). At the beginning of his career, Berlin specialized in the composition of “coon” songs, worked out in “nigger keys” and on “nigger pianos.” The name “Alexander,”

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considered too grand for a black man, figured in many coon songs and had become, at least in New York's Tin Pan Alley, synonymous with the word “coon” itself.

The culmination of the Jewish contribution to the popularization of African-American music was the work of George Gershwin, born Jacob Gershvin (or Gershwine, all “americanizations” of Gershovitz, his father's name) in 1898 in New York City. He was of the generation raised on ragtime. In 1919 Gershwin hit it big. Although the first productions of his “Swanee” (lyrics by Irving Caesar) were unsuccessful, when Al Jolson used it in a Winter Garden concert and then in his Broadway show “Sinbad”, the number became a mega-hit, eventually selling over a million copies of sheet music and over two million records.

The success of “Swanee” was negligible, however, compared to his magnum opus, first performed in 1924: his “Rhapsody in Blue”. Drawing upon jazz and blues tonalities and his command of the works of modern masters such as Debussy and Stravinsky, Gershwin achieved the tour de force of making symphonic music popular and popular music respectable. In doing so, and in continuing to make important cultural contributions to a specifically United-Statesian cultural heritage (such as his “Porgy and Bess”), Gershwin and his predecessors made Jewishness more essential to being United-Statesian. If Jewish-American artists and entertainers also contributed to a growing acceptance of African-American musical sensibilities and to greater respect for “black” people in the United States more generally, it was the Jewish population that benefited most immediately.

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Increasingly defined as a fearful “other” during the first decades of the twentieth century, an entirely different conjuncture of circumstances was created when the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941. From this moment, the expression of racism and ethnic prejudices became relatively intolerable because the overriding national priority was unity in the war effort. The mobilization for war took precedence over all other considerations. Racial and ethnic conflicts, such as existed during the First World War, had to be avoided within the military ranks as well as in the civil society.

The problem was raised openly in the briefing of freshly inducted soldiers. The war, it was carefully explained, was a democratic crusade against fascism and one of the characteristics of fascism was racism and other forms of intolerance. “Fascism”, the soldiers were told, “supplies the scapegoat – Catholics, Jews, Negroes, labor unions, big business – any group upon which the insecure and unemployed can be brought to pin the blame for their misfortune.... If we permit discrimination, prejudice, or hate to rob anyone of his democratic rights, our own freedom and all democracy are threatened...”. Hitler in particular is mentioned for having singled-out the Jews and for claiming that the real Germans were the foundation of a “master race”. « *U.S. Army Fact Sheet 64 : Fascism, » Appendix 2 in George Seldes, *Even the Gods Can't Change History : The Facts Speak for Themselves*, Secaucus, Lyle Stuart, 1976, pp. 337-339. The message was clear: ethnic or racial intolerance was unpatriotic and incompatible with military service. Significantly, the end of the War coincided with another important event: the election of twenty-two-year-old Bess Myerson as the first Jewish Miss America.*

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Other, more purely political considerations soon came to make anti-Semitism difficult to express. It is well known that President Harry S. Truman used the power of his office to favor the establishment of a Jewish state. What is often ignored is that until 1948 there was no political consensus in support of such a project in the United States.

Why did Truman give such support to the Zionist project? The elections of 1946 and 1948 figured importantly. The Republican Party was making a strong comeback, even before Franklin Roosevelt's death (in April 1945). Especially important in 1948 was that New York was a “swing state,” meaning its electoral votes were decisive in the election. The fact that the United States was quickly moving into the Middle East in order to replace Great Britain and France was also a major determinant; but Truman's personal mentality and ideas were firmly opposed to the “Arabism”

which existed in the State Department and elsewhere in the government.

That Truman was influenced by Zionism there seems little doubt, but in 1946 the idea that the creation of a Jewish state might be good for somebody, Jews included, was not generally supported. A particularly good example of the dominant view is the title of an editorial in *Life* magazine in its issue of August 19, 1946: “Palestine. The real need of the Jews is not for a ‘homeland’ but for a better world.” Accordingly, in the largest circulation national magazine, Truman was sternly criticized for catering to the Jewish vote in New York. In so doing, claimed the editorialist, Truman was considering “the Palestine question” simply in terms of it being “the price of a Zionist-led Jewish vote.” The problem was that, instead of the creation of Jewish ghetto in the Holy Land, in the writer’s opinion, observance of the fundamental freedoms listed in the United Nation’s Charter “would do far more to solve the Jewish problem than any multiplication of the Jewish population in Palestine.” « [6]

Coming from the influential publication created and directed by Henry Luce, inventor of the slogan “the American century” and partisan of a new, interventionist policy for the U.S., this opinion cannot be simply explained as a kind of residual isolationism. Nevertheless, a generalized commitment to the idea, and then the reality, of a Jewish state emerged.

As indicated, between the two World Wars anti-Semitism was strong in the United States. As a major part of a generalized reactionary discourse, its expression was open in political life. The great change came during and after the Second World War and the reasons for it are multiple. Firstly, there was a new nationalism encouraged by the War, reinforced by the demographic shifts required by such total mobilization, all of which tended to weaken ethnic identifications and marginalize the expression of ethnic intolerance. Secondly, the entry of many Jews into government service during the New Deal and their conversion to the expanded anti-Communist orthodoxy after the War changed a popular perception of educated Jews as political progressives.

A third reason for the decline of anti-Semitism is surely knowledge of the massive judeocide perpetrated by the Nazi regime during the War. Anti-Semitism in the context of the War had no proper place in what was presented as a crusade against fascism, and then in the crusade against the so-called international Communist conspiracy. It is noteworthy that during the Rosenberg affair anti-Semitism seemingly played no essential role. The judge who railroaded the unfortunate couple was Jewish himself. Even the demagogic populist Joseph McCarthy cannot be accused; McCarthy’s chief council, Roy Cohn, was also Jewish.

It appears that the new Red Scare—the anti-communist witch hunts and then (after February 1950) Joseph McCarthy’s adventures—were important in the formation of what would become a new consensus. The waning of anti-Semitism in the United States was an important element of the new political consensus.

Yet another reason for the weakening of anti-Semitism in the United States can be mentioned. It is possible that the use of atomic bombs against the Japanese population also contributed to the waning of anti-Semitism. President Truman may not have lost sleep over the instant obliteration of hundreds of thousands of human lives, but for many ordinary people it was not so easy. Did the emphasis on the crimes of the Nazis have a therapeutic, and even diversionary effect in the United States in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (not to speak of the fire bombing of Tokyo and Dresden)? One horror, the “Holocaust,” may have helped to erase the others from public scrutiny and popular consciousness. Overall, the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine may have benefited from this conjuncture of events.

The evolution of beliefs and opinions in this regard is certainly complex. No one factor can account for the important changes that took place during the immediate post-war period. All the factors must be considered pre-conditions for the public support later given to the pro-Israeli orientation of successive U.S. governments. The geopolitical imperatives meant that, firstly, anti-Semitism could not longer be tolerated. Secondly, it meant that opposition to the Zionist state would be confused with anti-Semitism. This was an ideological imperative corresponding to the new global strategy.

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Post-scriptum :

This article is taken from Larry Portis, « 'Arabs' and 'Jews' as Significant Others: Zionism and the Ambivalence of 'Orientalism' in the United-Statesian Imagination, » *Middle Ground. Journal of Literary and Cultural Encounters*, number 1, 2007, pp. 75-96.

[1] The word « semite » was invented in the eighteenth century by a German scholar, A.L. von Schlözer, in reference to a family of languages including Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. It was in the nineteenth century that the term « semitic » became associated with a notion of « ethnicity ». See David K. Shipler, *Arab and Jew : Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*, New York, Penguin, 1987 [1986], pp. 314-315.

[2] See, for example, Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1995.

[3] Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine : Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 34-35. See also James A. Field Jr., *America and the Mediterranean World 1776-1882*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 274-277.

[4] See my book, *Histoire du fascisme aux Etats-Unis*, Paris, Editions CNT-RP, 2008.

[5] See Michael Freedland, *Al Jolson*, London, Sphere Books, 1975.

[6] Palestine: Real Need of the Jews is for a Better World, » *Life*, number 21, August 19, 1946, p. 30.