
A Critique of Leonard Dinnerstein's "The Origins of Black Anti-Semitism in America"

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Professor Leonard Dinnerstein's contribution to the November 1986 issue of *American Jewish Archives* is so pockmarked with conceptual and methodological problems that the temptation to respond is irresistible. Initially presented as a paper before the Organization of American Historians and presumably to be woven into a larger study of national hostility to Jews that Dinnerstein is co-authoring, "The Origins of Black Anti-Semitism in America" merits second-guessing of how a professional historian of his stature ought to have treated so intriguing and delicate a subject.

Confining himself largely to the period before the urban interaction of these two minorities in the 1930's, Dinnerstein claims that specific sources of Black animosity "built upon a layer of previously enunciated prejudices" that both Protestantism and folklore had promoted. The religion of the white majority had depicted Jews as the killers of Christ; the traditional beliefs of Euro-Americans had sanctioned the myth of "the cunning and exploitative Jew whose ruthlessly amassed fortune is used to acquire political and economic control of society. . . . These stereotypes had existed among Blacks since their socialization into American culture" (p. 113). The husk of the article published in this journal presents evidence of Black acceptance of such negative stereotypes, drawn from Afro-American folklore and newspapers, and from spokesmen, intellectuals and observers from Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin.

Though the evidence itself is incontrovertible (and could no doubt be enlarged), its meaning has been misconstrued; and the author's failure either to understand it or to give it a context amounts to a

serious misrepresentation of Black attitudes toward Jews. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American bigotry—toward Blacks as well as toward Jews—reached its most disgraceful nadir. Rich Jews were being snubbed in hotels and resorts and denounced in the fringes of Populist rhetoric, while poor Jews were feared as incarnations of filth, disease, and political radicalism; and all Jews were in some ways subject to discrimination and to stigmas deeply embedded in Western civilization. The patrician Henry Adams's feverish nativism is far better known than the revulsion of his fellow historian Frederick Jackson Turner to Boston's ghetto, "fairly packed with swarthy sons and daughters of the tribe of Israel—such noises, such smells, such sights! . . . The street was . . . filled with big Jew men . . . and with Jew youths and maidens—some of the latter pretty—as you sometimes see a lily in the green muddy slime. . . . At last, after much elbowing, I came upon Old North [Church] rising out of this mass of oriental noise and squalor like a haven of rest." Such estrangement gripped other citizens whose dream of a redeemer nation was suddenly imperiled.

This was the atmosphere that Dinnerstein's article ignores, the atmosphere that Americans of that era breathed. It would be astonishing if Black Americans would be utterly immunized against anti-Semitism, would be utterly unaffected by the suspicions and anxieties that at the turn of the century added up to racism. Though Dinnerstein does not indicate why he expected Blacks to have exempted themselves from this *mentalite*, and though he does not claim that previous historians have denied the presence of Black anti-Semitism, his own evidence discloses no special animus in Black attitudes. Indeed none of the examples that he cites is as virulent as Henry Adams's own Judeophobia; none parallels the visceral disdain that Turner recorded in 1887. And since Blacks in this period were powerless, unable to try to ban Jews from public places, or from colleges, or from country clubs, or (through immigration restriction) from the country itself, Black antagonism often amounted to folk tunes (which are as old as "Hugh of Lincoln," which was far more sinister), or to children's name-calling (as when Horace Mann Bond—not yet a teenager—responded with "Christ killer" after an even younger Jewish boy repeatedly called him "Nigger"). Any historian conversant with the force and

scale of bigotry in the decades of mass immigration should be less struck by instances of Black anti-Semitism than by how shallow and how feckless they were.

But a more disturbing conceptual error mars Dinnerstein's article, which inadvertently demonstrates that half-truths may be more misleading than falsehoods. Any generalization about Black antipathy toward Jews in this era constitutes a half-truth because Dinnerstein ignores the flip side. He treats Black admiration and envy of Jews as though such feelings did not exist, though their connection to negative stereotypes was hardly fortuitous or irrelevant. Consider James Weldon Johnson's claim that "the two million Jews" exercised a "controlling interest in the finances of the nation." Dinnerstein is responsible enough to quote what Johnson added—that Blacks could therefore "draw encouragement and hope from the experiences of modern Jews"—without realizing that, since the remark reflected a *positive* stereotype, the thrust of Dinnerstein's own article is undermined.

Booker T. Washington *admired* Jews, and also hoped that his fellow Blacks would emulate the Jews' "unity, pride, and love of race; and, as the years go on, they will be more and more influential in this country—a country in which they were once despised." He added: "It is largely because the Jewish race has had faith in itself. Unless the Negro learns more and more to imitate the Jew in these matters, to have faith in himself, he cannot expect to have any high degree of success." Washington joined in the protest against the Kishinev pogrom, saw in the struggle of the ancient Hebrews a model for escaping from the house of bondage, came to appreciate the extent of Jewish suffering and of the Jewish "yearning for learning" as well, and even cited as his favorite Shakespearean passage Shylock's stirring defense of Jewish humanity. Washington's glowing praise of Jews did not necessarily reflect intimate knowledge, but it was hardly the idiom of an anti-Semite. And yet thus impugning his reputation is the only way that Dinnerstein can see him, thus wildly distorting the actual attitudes of "the wizard of Tuskegee."

Dinnerstein's portrait of W. E. B. DuBois is similarly marred by blindness toward evidence of positive attitudes, whether in dedicating his autobiography (!) to the memory of Joel Spingarn or, writing of Jewish organizations, in urging Blacks to "look at them with admira-

tion and emulate them." DuBois was especially impressed with the Jews' "magnificent clearness of . . . intellect" and their "fineness of family life." As early as 1919 he announced that Pan-Africanism "means to us what the Zionist Movement must mean to the Jews," and he continually upheld the right of the Jews to return to the Holy Land to reestablish a state. Included in Dinnerstein's useful endnotes are works in which other historians have presented the complex shadings—the ambivalences—that do justice to their subjects. But the scholarship of Louis Harlan, Arnold Shankman, and David Hellwig has neither modulated nor qualified the simplistic portraits of Black leaders and intellectuals that Dinnerstein has painted.

Such carelessness is unlikely to ease the task of calibrating and understanding the phenomenon of bigotry. Its components have included superstition, ignorance, perversity, greed, hypocrisy, resentment—pretty close to the entire run of human vices. But it would be a mistake for any historian to assume that religious and racial prejudice is concocted entirely from hallucinations, that it is without any factual tether. Sometimes stereotypes may persist because enough individuals may exhibit—or seem to exhibit—characteristics ascribed to the group to which these persons belong.

Take, for example, the reputation clinging to Jews for financial cunning and "money-grubbing." Some Blacks noticed these traits in some Jews; some white Gentiles noticed these traits too; indeed some *Jews* discerned avarice in some of their fellow Jews as well. By failing to acknowledge that keen and often crude economic aspirations motivated many Jews (for which the causes could be traced), or by failing to hypothesize some empirical warrant for the impression many Jews somehow conveyed, Dinnerstein can account for Black acceptance of such stereotypes only in terms of malevolence, or perhaps ignorance. It is therefore ironic—and unfortunate for his argument—that Professor Selma Berrol's article on Julia Richman and the Eastern European immigrants in New York, in the very same issue of *American Jewish Archives*, concludes that the wealth and status of the German Jewish elite made "our crowd" a model for the downtown Jews: "The clear example of thousands of Jews who had achieved prosperity and of a few who had become very rich in America was worth a hundred civics lessons" (p. 174). Or does Dinnerstein believe that the spectacular

economic ascent of the Eastern European Jews in America was due to some sort of absent-mindedness, or accident, or adherence only to Micah's plea "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God"?

But however tintured with social actuality, stereotypes are not easily eroded; and Dinnerstein has sought to explore "The Origins of Black Anti-Semitism in America" because it would be "somewhat ahistorical to explain later conflicts and resentments toward Jews on the basis of current events." The intense animosity that has surfaced in recent years was grounded in a "heritage of suspicion and distrust [that] made Blacks particularly alert to any real or suspected act of treachery on the part of Jews with whom they came in contact" (p. 120). Although no interpretation that is ahistorical would evoke much enthusiasm among readers of this journal, Dinnerstein's assumption is highly dubious. Novelties do occur in history; breaks and innovations do interrupt and alter the flow of events. That, in my opinion, has happened with Black anti-Semitism, whose most recent eruptions derive very little authority from the traditional myths of deicide nor even perhaps of economic cunning that Dinnerstein has located.

The line of contemporary hostility that begins with, say, Malcolm X and extends to Louis Farrakhan has been incorporated into a Third World ideology that defines the United States as the chief source of evil on the planet and Israel as the chief source of evil in the Middle East. Although this viewpoint is not ashamed to draw upon ancient myths about Jews, its emphasis is geopolitical, and is usually collectivist in its social aspirations. It has often been scarred by the cruelties of American racism and is animated by a solidarity with Black Africans, Arabs and other peoples of color. How implausible then that this Third World orientation owes much, if anything, to Dinnerstein's targets—to the accommodationist Washington, to the NAACP's Johnson (and DuBois), et al. It is even less likely that Black Muslims and other contemporary anti-Zionist ideologists have drawn upon the ballads and folklore of Jews as Christ-killers.

But the absence of any overt intellectual indebtedness is not the only reason to be skeptical of Dinnerstein's assumption about continuity. For recent Black anti-Semitism exhibits some distinctive features. In the four decades since the end of the Second World War, bigotry has

dramatically declined in the general American population, and hatred of Jews is so disreputable that not even Jesse Jackson would want "He Warned Against the Jewish Conspiracy" inscribed on his tombstone. But anti-Semitism has persisted—and even grown—among Blacks, especially younger Blacks; and its correlation with levels of education seems to be positive rather than negative. Such peculiarities pose a special challenge to communal defense agencies, and therefore ought to give pause to any historian who takes for granted a continuity between slave spirituals ("De Jews done killed poor Jesus") and the current association of ideological hustlers with Arab propagandists who are content to round up the usual suspects.

In his essay on "The Idol of Origins," Marc Bloch warned against the ambiguity in the very word that preoccupies historians. For "origins" can mean merely beginnings as well as causes, and prior episodes can be misleading guides to subsequent conduct and belief. Unfortunately Dinnerstein's article is ensnared in this ambiguity. Avoiding it means noticing dissimilarities as well as parallels, and specifying the sequences of events and beliefs. Defining contexts as well as selecting texts, and delving deeply into intricate veins of thought rather than strip-mining it for quotations, are surely more promising procedures if both past and present are to be mastered.

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