

Jonathan Karp
Binghamton University, SUNY

Jews as Historians of the Black American Experience

Between the 1930s and late 1970s, Jews were highly prominent among scholars of African American history and culture. Although early twentieth-century Black scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter Woodson created the sub-discipline of African American Studies, by the Depression era they had been joined by Jewish-born anthropologists and historians, such as Melville Herskovitz and Herbert Aptheker. These scholars, I argue, helped to shape the research agenda and methodological foundations of the study of black history. While impressive, my goal in examining their activity is not celebratory but analytical, and to a degree even critical: I ask, why would members of one minority group devote themselves to describing the history of another?

During the post-World War II era up to the middle 1970s, the Jewish role only intensified (e.g., Elkins, the Foners, Fogel and Engerman, Gutman, Levine). For much of this period Jews enjoyed comparatively greater access to mainstream university positions than Black colleagues. I argue that Jews used this access to function as surrogate scholars whose work significantly advanced the process of incorporating the Black experience into the broader American history curriculum. Judged in the context of its time their work constitutes a remarkable effort on the part of outsiders to comprehend the historical experience of another, still more marginalized group. In fact, several of these scholars defined the Black experience as *the* central and paradigmatic thread in U.S. history in ways that prefigured current debates.

The key questions are why Jewish scholars became so overrepresented, whether Jewish interpretations of Black history displayed a coherent ideological pattern or consistent characteristics, and to what degree Jewish scholars of Black Studies were self-consciously aware of the role Jewishness played in their work. We must also address how Black scholars reacted to the Jewish presence in their own field.

In my analysis I eschew single-factor causal explanations; clearly, individual Jewish scholars were driven by distinct sets of motivations and evinced a range of ideological orientations. Some related their work on Black history to their own Jewish identities while others did not. In fact, it will be necessary to devise a typology in order to convey the range and diversity inherent in this topic. But by examining the work itself, the institutional networks that linked Jewish students of black history, and through memoirs and interviews, I seek to arrive at some tentative conclusions about this complex phenomenon.