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Melville Jean Herskovits

NEW PRICE SCHEDULE: Because HAN has been running at a deficit for some time, we have decided that we must raise subscription prices in all categories by one dollar, starting with the first number of the next volume, HAN XXVIII:1 (June 2001). New subscriptions or renewals received after January 1, 2001, will be billed at the new rates, as indicated on the facing page.

FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Herskovits' Jewishness

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Although the work of Melville J. Herskovits stands as a fundamental starting-point for Afro-Americanists, ethnographers of the African diaspora in the Americas have rarely considered exploring the sociology of Herskovits' thought or how his anthropology was related to his own questions of identity. One approach is to examine his relationship to Jewishness and how it relates to his (changing) views on African culture in the Americas. This is suggested by the work of Gelya Frank, who in a forthcoming article (2001) compares Herskovits' ideas about the Jewish and African diasporas. Following her lead, the documents discussed here may help in understanding how Herskovits' Jewishness may have animated his perspective on what he called "the New World Negro."

The child of a Hungarian-Jewish father and a German-Jewish mother, Herskovits was born in 1895 in Bellefontaine, Ohio, and raised in El Paso, Texas, and Erie, Pennsylvania. For a while he considered becoming a rabbi, and in 1915 entered Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. However, in the longer run he did not identify with an immigrant ethos or seek to maintain a "Jewish culture" in his personal life, but saw himself from an assimilationist perspective. Although his status at Hebrew Union College might have allowed a deferment from military service in World War I, he chose to serve in the US Army in the Medical Corps and was stationed in France. After being demobilized, he studied briefly at the University of Poitiers and upon his return to the United States entered the University of Chicago, receiving a Ph.B. in history in 1920 (JH interview, 9/30/00; see also Simpson 1973). He went on to undertake graduate work in anthropology at Columbia University with Franz Boas, receiving his A.M. in 1921 and his Ph.D. in 1923, for a library dissertation on "The Cattle Complex in East Africa." With support from the National Research Council Board of Biological Sciences, he spent the next several years doing physical anthropological research on the effects of race-crossing on the bodily form of African Americans. In New York, he met his future wife and collaborator Frances Shapiro, the child of Russian immigrants, who had come to this country at the age of eight in 1905. Married in Paris, on July 24, 1924, the two settled in New York, where they were part of a circle of anthropologists that included Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Mead's first husband, Luther Cressman.

In his autobiography, Cressman recalled the Herskovitses as part of a circle of "really close friends" for whom the Cressman/Mead apartment at 419 West 199th Street "offered sanctuary in the 1920s." Cressman described Mead's relationship with Herskovits:

Melville Herskovits, with his Ph.D. degree in anthropology, older and vastly more experienced than Margaret, was finishing his postdoctoral research on the American Negro, and for several weeks was going through the throes of deciding whether to accept a position at Western Reserve or Northwestern University. He was a welcome and frequent guest who always enlivened our conversations. He used to "rag" Margaret for what he called her unscientific way of coming to conclusions. The arguments, always friendly, were sometimes heated. Mel asserted and gave chapter and verse showing how, when she [he?] found untenable a conclusion or description of behavior, etc., her defense was always, "If it isn't, it ought to be," and then chose the "ought to be" position. Margaret's escape was usually, "Well, what's so bad about that?" and the discussion would continue, but on another subject. As I

recall those pleasant evenings I think the more-experienced Mel's "ragging" was an effort to help Margaret sharpen her thinking. [Cressman 1988:98, 194]

In May, 1925, Mead had just passed her doctoral exams and was headed to Samoa for her fateful first fieldwork. Cressman was about to leave for Europe on a study fellowship. Herskovits wrote to Mead about the possibility of subletting their apartment:

Dear Margaret,

...you have my congratulations on the way you passed your exam. After Franz's [Boas] shrug of taking-your-passing-for granted, I must confess that I'm not much surprised.

The rush about this letter has to do with living quarters for us. I received a letter from Alvin Johnson about an apartment at the New School, but I thought about your place, and how both you and Luther had mentioned our taking it maybe. We've been talking it over, and since both of us ain't the kind of birds that gather moss, if you will permit the mixture, a furnished place seems rather good to us. I have an idea that we'd both be quite interested in taking your place, but we ought to know about it at once. Hence this speed in getting this to you, and hence our gratitude for equal speed on your part for reply.

Now, for some questions. How long would you want us to take if for? How about book space for our books? That is, what would you do with your'n? How much would you let us have it for? (Impressive references furnished, both foreign and domestic, on request.) Also, — we'd be getting to the city about the end of the first week in June. Would you have any suggestions as to where we might stay until your place was available for us? I thought maybe Ruth's [Benedict?] room, if she'd be gone by then. Also, Luther would be very welcome to use the place before he sailed, as we'd be away vacationing between the 15th of July and the 1st of September, — altho your acquiescence in the face of the nude Fann [Frances] brought back from France would be necessary before exposing him to its charms, I'm afraid.

Anyhow...Be a good guy and let us know pronto whether your place is available, and if we could have it if it is, and how and why and when and where and which and who and all the rest of it.

(MHP, Box 13, Folder 20, MJH/MM 5/18/25)

Mead replied the next day (loc. cit, 5/19/25):

Dear Mel:

I'm in a raging tearing fury. I spent the day with rosy plans of how nice it would be for you and Fan (should I say that?) To have the aptment [sic], filing cabinet et al, and now I discover that we have been residing these two years in a race-discriminating tenement where it is not possible. I'm dreadfully sorry, both that you can't have the aptment [sic] when I'd so much like to have you have it and also that I ever mentioned it. But of course, I had no idea, my usually suspicious nature wasn't working for once. It makes me mad to think that we've been living in such a house. And it's absolutely cast iron because the main office reserves the right to refuse any tenants, even of sub-letting.

You know how badly I feel, Mel. Anything either of us can do by way of house hunting for you we'll be delighted to do.

Damn it, Margaret

Herskovits' response to Mead is not known. The incident with the Mead-Cressman apartment would not be the first nor last time that Herskovits, by all accounts a secular Jew, would be confronted with anti-Semitism. But what did Herskovits himself think about his own Jewishness? One early statement is revealing. In 1927 he drafted an article with a number of autobiographical references entitled "When is a Jew a Jew?" Writing in an era of intense nativistic xenophobia, Herskovits was clearly engaged in a process of self-reflection and self-exploration:

I have often wondered just what, exactly, constitutes a Jew. I call myself one. Yet neither in training, in tradition, in religious beliefs, nor in culture am I what might be termed a person any more Jewish than any other American born and reared in a typical Middle Western milieu. And yet, when I hear the name bandied about with so much ease, and with the common assurance that naming a thing constitutes a statement of all its implications, I sometimes wonder just how one would go about constructing a definition that would hold perhaps a very small bit of water. What this means, of course, is trying to find some sort of Jewish least common denominator, — the largest classification or the most general trait which can be thought of as characterizing all Jews. Because, today, I do not believe such a definition exists, — in my case, I have not found one which satisfies me. For me, the word Jew falls into the category of things of which one says, "I know what they are, but I can't tell anyone else just how I know it." (1927:109)

Seeking "this least common denominator," Herskovits went on to consider and debunk "things people say are characteristic of Jews, and what Jews say characterize themselves" (1927:109). The "chosen people story" was a "bit of excellent story-telling" that played an important part "in bolstering the self-respect of Jews in more naive days when persecution took on less refined forms" (110). But Jews were not a "race," as "the evidence from anthropometric sources shows emphatically that the Jews are not a racial unit" (112), nor were they a "nationality," since more lived outside Palestine than in:

the Jew who lives in a country adopts its mores, and becomes part of its citizenry to the extent to which he is permitted; indeed, we have nowhere the spectacle of Jew as Jew refusing to take privileges of citizenship when it is offered, but we find him begging for it when it is denied. And why not? After all, when I am asked by a foreigner what I am, I will answer "American." And so does every American Jew, for to do otherwise is but meaningless. [112]

Rejecting also a linguistic common denominator, Herskovits argued that not all Jews understood Hebrew, or even Yiddish—which could be considered "their lingua franca" (112), and he dismissed the idea that there was a common culture, due to the operation of cultural diffusion. He was no less sceptical when it came to Jewish religious thought:

I am not affiliated with any sort of a Jewish religious organization, nor do I hold the beliefs commonly regarded as religious at all. Does this make me any the less a Jew? I do not believe that it would be said so. Indeed, as a student at the Hebrew Union College, troubled about some of the larger theological concepts implied in membership in the rabbinate, I questioned to some of the older students the propriety of continuing as a prospective rabbi when I held these beliefs, which differed with the traditional beliefs of Judaism and particularly with the opinions of them held by members of the faculty, especially the president, a noted theologian. Imagine my intense surprise, when I was advised, "Suppose you do differ from them? Why can't you interpret these traditions to suit your own beliefs? Can't you pray to the Social Force, and call that God in your own mind? I don't believe in a personal God any more than you, but that's the way I look at it. No one can tell me, as a Jew, what I must believe. And if I differ from what has been believed, so much the worse for the beliefs." I cite this as a striking example of the extent to which Jews cannot be defined as those persons professing a definite series of dogmas, especially since this

particular student is at present a member of the American Reform rabbinate. It is notorious, the extent to which Jews tend to accept agnostic and atheistic beliefs. Or creeds of an ethical or therapeutic nature. And yet no one calls the professing agnostic who has been reared as a Jew anything but Jewish, just as no one calls the leader of the Ethical Cultural Society and perhaps the majority of his followers anything but Jews. I am afraid that this element of our definition must, like those preceding it, be cast aside. [1927:113-114]

Submitted to the The Menorah Journal, the article was rejected by the editor, Henry Hurwitz: "it is certainly a clear attempt to come to a 'definition,' but I am afraid it adds nothing new to the subject" (MHP, Box 13, Folder 24, HH/MJH, 1/11/26; cf. Jackson 1986:101). The essay was published instead the following year in a journal entitled, significantly, the Modern Quarterly (Herskovits 1927).

In 1927, Herskovits moved to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, as one of the first Jewish faculty members and to a town not known at the time for its receptivity to Jews. He moved quickly from his physical anthropology research on African Americans to the folklore and ethnology of populations of African descent in the Americas. He was listed, however, in Who's Who in American Jewry, and continue to be frequently approached by Jewish organizations and publications. I.M. Rubinow, editor of the Jewish Social Service Quarterly, asked him to review Reuter's The American Race Problem, A Study of the Negro (1927), saying "I know of no other Jew in this country who could do it so well"(MHP Box 10, Folder 22, IR/MJH 1/24/17). He did a radio broadcast on "race" and participated in teachers workshops for the Chicago Round Table of the National Conference of Jews and Christians (Box 26, Folder 25; Box 27, Folder 22). In late 1929 and early 1930, he gave lectures to the Jewish People's Institute of Chicago on "Racial Differences," "The Negro as a Minority Group," and "The Jew as a Minority Group" (Box 10, Folder 21). In 1929, he gave a talk for the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation at the University of Illinois on "The Nordic Theory and Racial Superiority" (Box 3, Folder 32).

There was a tension, however, between Herskovits' view that anthropology should approach a value-free science and the discipline's identification with partisan causes — even Jewish ones. In the fall of 1933, Rubinow, who was also secretary of Cincinnati's B'nai B'rith, asked Herskovits about his opinion of an idea put forward by Czech physician Ignaz Zollschan of an anthropological institute at the University of Jerusalem in order to combat Nazi racial theories. An anti-racist activist who published on the Jewish "racial question" in 1910, and who had met Franz Boas as early as 1912, Zollschan failed to win Boas' cooperation in the establishment of an anthropological research institute in New York City because Boas thought him a Jewish nationalist whose "whole attitude has been to set up the Jews as a particularly gifted and excellent group." In 1933, however, Zollschan succeeded in getting the Czech Academy of Science to publish a volume on the scientific basis of racial equality and in 1934 was in Britain, where he took credit for the anti-racist proclamations of major scientific figures (Barkan 1988:191-92). Although Herskovits, who had previously met Zollschan, felt that he could support such an effort in the long term, he questioned its utility for the immediate situation: "After all, the anthropological tenets that are held by the Nazi[s] are those of many years ago, and their racial theories have been discarded by practically every reputable anthropologist who has worked on the subject in the past generation. A Jewish institute for the study of the problems of race, it seems to me, would be handicapped by the very fact of its being Jewish" (MHP Box 3, Folder 31).

When Rubinow advised him of the establishment of a B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation social and cultural center at Northwestern, Herskovits said "I am afraid I am not overly enthusiastic about it." He explained: "While I have no sympathy for those who in any way camouflage their Jewishness, at the same time my interests have simply taken a path away from activities which definitely pertain to any group based on locality, circumstances of birth, or religious belief. My own position is that there is little place on the University campus for organizations of this type." Rubinow replied that, as an

economist, he understood “how preoccupied men of science must be with their own field,” and was therefore “not surprised at what may be described as your neutral attitude on the Jewish problem.” He was sure, however, that Herskovits’ “Jewish consciousness may be considerably strengthened, even though you need not become what is sometimes rather critically referred to as ‘a professional Jew’, as I have, that is, one whose preoccupation is very largely with the Jewish problem.” In the present climate Jewish intellectuals in Germany were being “jolted out of their indifference by the fact that the ire of anti-Semitism is being directed with especial ferocity against the Jew in the academic world,” and even American universities were becoming places not of tolerance but anti-Semitism. In this context the Hillel Foundation’s function was one of self-defense (loc. cit)

Although Herskovits had doubted the need for Jewish organizations, he was not oblivious to the threat of Nazism. In 1934 he agreed to keep the American Jewish Committee informed of visits to campus by any representatives of the German Embassy on propaganda missions (MHP Box 2, Folder 10). In 1938, he bragged that he had debated German anthropologist Eugen Fischer— whom he called the “führer” of the German delegation — at an international anthropology congress in Copenhagen (Jackson 1986:115). One gets the impression, however, that this was based on his understanding of anthropology as a science and his heroic cultural relativism (Fernández 1990; Hatch 1997) and not due to his Jewishness. His attacks on racism and attempts to debunk the concept of “race” were those of a good Boasian, with a certain action orientation.

In 1936, Herskovits came to the assistance of Paul Kirchhoff, a radical German anthropologist, to prevent his deportation at the expiration of his visitor’s visa. Kirchhoff had come to the United States in 1929 on a Rockefeller Foundation grant obtained with the help of Boas, and had done fieldwork in Mexico under the direction of A.L. Kroeber, and then among the Navajo under that of Edward Sapir (Jiménez Moreno 1979:14). In 1931 he was in England as a member of Malinowski’s seminar, but was subsequently barred at the last minute from fieldwork in Rhodesia by the Colonial Office, and then from New Guinea, on the basis of information provided by British officials. (Stocking 1985:136). With the rise of Nazism, he was helped to Paris by the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux, and then went on to the United States, where Boas used his connections to assist him (Kutscher 1974:242-3). When his visa neared expiration, Herskovits urged Kirchhoff to see Samuel A. Goldsmith, executive director of the Jewish Charities of Chicago, to get financial assistance to leave for Mexico in order to avoid deportation to Germany. But when Goldsmith asked Herskovits to sign a note of endorsement for a loan to Kirchhoff, Herskovits replied with a testy letter, saying the need was urgent because Kirchhoff was “liable to deportation to Germany with the certainty of a concentration camp starting him in the face”:

Obviously he must be got out of this country. Since with the best will in the world and all good intention of repaying a loan it is extremely unlikely that he will ever be able to do this, I felt I would much rather myself underwrite the amount he needs, since your organization was not willing to do so, than have an endorsement to a note hanging over me. One of my colleagues and I have therefore set about raising the necessary amount, with the understanding that I will personally supply the difference between what is needed and is raised, despite the difficulty of my doing this on an academic budget. We should be very glad to receive a contribution from you to help us in saving this brilliant young German scientist from the fate that confronts him, and should you care to send me your check for \$10.00 by return mail, I will be glad to add it to the fund we are gathering for him (MHP Box 10, Folder 20, SAG/MJH 10/12/36; MJH/SAG, 10/27/36)

Kirchhoff made it to Mexico that year and stayed to become a leading figure of Mexican anthropology.

In 1941, Herskovits accepted an offer to be on the advisory council of the American Jewish Committee's Research Institute on Peace and Post-War Problems (MHP Box 2 Folder 10). In as much as that was also the year in which he published The Myth of the Negro Past, it may be useful to contrast the approach he took to Jewish identity and that of African Americans. In his early work on the American Negro, he maintained that African Americans, like everyone else (including of course Jews), were caught up in the process of assimilation to the wider American culture (Herskovits 1925, 1927). However, his position regarding African American assimilation evolved in ways that his position on Jewish assimilation did not. Pursuing the research project he defined in 1930 as that of "The Negro in the New World" (Herskovits 1930), he carried on fieldwork with Frances Herskovits in Surinam in 1928 and 1929, and came to the conclusion that the culture of the Bush Negroes was "much more African than anyone has dreamed" (in Jackson 1984:108) — and this conclusion was subsequently reinforced by fieldwork in Dahomey, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil (Yelvington 2001). By the time he published The Myth of the Negro Past (1941), he had concluded that the deprecation of the Negro's cultural heritage was a major factor in sustaining race prejudice and oppression of African Americans. His goal was to provide blacks with a sense of pride in their past through the scientific documentation and systematic presentation of "Africanisms" in "New World Negro" culture. These Africanisms were tenacious survivals of African cultures that were present underneath the surface cultural forms of whatever society Negroes found themselves in. Herskovits was convinced that, with this past documented, prejudice and discrimination would be bound to decrease.

In 1927, Herskovits acknowledged similarities between African Americans and Jews in their common reaction to subjugation: "all Jews have much the same historical tradition of reaction from persecution and from the feeling that they are different from their neighbors. That this is something very real to every Jew one cannot deny, but it is not for us to define the Jew in terms of it." Drawing a comparison, he said "I have had occasion, in the past few years, to work among Negroes. And the more closely I have come to know them, the more and more I have come to see the same typical reactions among them, — reactions which I had before felt were typically Jewish." But, he continued:

What we have...is really the response to a pressure from without, the reaction of a group which is set aside in the attitudes of their fellow-men as different, or inferior, or something to be disdained. It is nothing Jewish, — it is essentially human. But in so far as Jews feel it, they are alike. And I doubt if there are many Jews who do not feel it to some degree. But I venture to say that were the cause for it, the attitude of the non-Jews, removed, these so-called "typical" Jewish reactions would not take long in disappearing. . . . To me, it is one of the most fascinating puzzles imaginable. There is, essentially, when we analyze the situation, nothing on which one may put his finger. And yet the fact remains. Down thru the ages there have been Jews, as there are today. And I wonder if a more satisfactory definition can be given than the simple one of: "A Jew is a person who calls himself a Jew, or who is called Jewish by others" (1927:115-17)

Herskovits' explicit comparison of Jews to blacks showed that he then felt prejudice from the "outside" played a crucial role for both groups in determining the nature of group identity on the "inside." He struggled to show that, for starkly divergent reasons, this prejudice was misplaced in both cases. Because he felt (and apparently continued to feel) that there was no common core of traits that defined Jewishness, the logical implication of this argument was that it was prejudice itself that created Jews and Jewishness. But his research undercut the attempt to extend this line of reasoning to the descendants of Africans in the New World. In the face of slavery and severe repression they had maintained essential elements of their ancestral cultures and it was for this reason that prejudice was the result of an ignorance of the "Negro past." Today, however, we might locate these differences in larger ideological and political forces, in the evolving relationship of Jewishness and whiteness in the United States, and in the continued racialization of African Americans.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Jean Herskovits for being interviewed and for permission to quote from her father's correspondence. The Mead letter is quoted courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York. Thanks also to Gelya Frank for sharing her forthcoming work, and to Erika Bourguignon for advice. Archival research for this piece was supported by a Faculty Research Award from the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program, University of South Florida.

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Gerald M. Berg (History, Sweet Briar College [Virginia]) is studying "John Beddoe and the 'True Color' of the Jews and the Irish," and would welcome information on the whereabouts of unpublished papers and correspondence of Beddoe, president of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1889-91 (gberg@sbc.edu).

Matthew Bokovoy (History, Univ. of Pennsylvania), is doing research on the construction of ethnic and racial identities in the San Diego fairs of 1915 and 1935, and in that also on the career of Ales Hrdlicka, his relationship to Franz Boas, and his early training by the French anthropologist Leonce Manouvrier.

Alice Conklin (History, University of Rochester) has received a Guggenheim Fellowship for research on "Ethnographic Liberalism in France, 1920-1945."