



Is America "Different?" A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism

Author(s): TONY MICHELS

Source: *American Jewish History*, September 2010, Vol. 96, No. 3 (September 2010), pp. 201-224

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23887725>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Jewish History*

JSTOR

Is America “Different?” A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism

TONY MICHELS

In his classic essay from 1955, “America Is Different,” Ben Halpern undertook to explain what he (and many others) viewed as the uniqueness of American Jewish history. The experience of Jews in the United States was singular, according to Halpern, because they at no point underwent an emancipation process wherein they needed to prove themselves worthy of citizenship. They became citizens at the founding of the republic without special consideration. Absent a “Jewish Question” in which the legal status of Jews was subject to debate, powerful antisemitic movements failed to develop on American soil. No significant political party ever attempted to strip the Jews of civil and political rights or undo the liberal constitutional order that guaranteed those rights. Needing neither to seek emancipation nor defend it, American Jews constituted “a post-Emancipation Jewry,” one that enjoyed unprecedented levels of freedom, acceptance, and affluence within a society characterized by a fluid class structure, ethnoreligious pluralism, and a malleable national character. The United States was thus “different,” not merely in the assortment of particulars that differentiates any country from another, but in its fundamentals. This democratic, pluralistic, and prosperous country proved hospitable to such an extent that it produced a profound departure: for the first time in their long history of dispersion, Jews found a true home.¹

Halpern’s essay presented a Jewish version of American exceptionalism, the deeply rooted belief in American national uniqueness.² As described

1. Ben Halpern, “America Is Different,” *Midstream* 1 (Autumn 1955): 39–52. For a biographical portrait of Halpern, see Arthur Goren, “Ben Halpern: ‘At Home in Exile,’” in *The ‘Other’ New York Jewish Intellectuals*, ed. Carole S. Kessner (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 71–100.

2. The editor’s introduction to the article states, “Many social and political movements originating in Europe had to contend with the problem of American ‘exceptionalism.’ As the American Jewish community approaches maturity, American Zionism feels compelled to re-examine some of its tenets in light of this ‘exceptionalism.’” Although the themes associated with American “exceptionalism” date back to the eighteenth century, the term itself was coined in the 1920s during a debate within the Communist Party over the state of American capitalism. Those who argued in favor of American capitalism’s long-range vitality were accused of promoting exceptionalism and therefore departing from Marxist theory. See Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 268–81.

by the late sociologist Daniel Bell, exceptionalism regards the United States as a “transforming presence whose emergence at the center of history had been made possible not only by the providential wealth of a virgin continent, but by the first successful application of a new principle in human affairs. . . . Having a common political faith from the start, it would escape the ideological vicissitudes and divisive passions of the European polity, and, being entirely a middle-class society, without aristocracy or bohème, it would not become ‘decadent,’ as had every other society in history. As a liberal society providing individual opportunity, safeguarding liberties, and expanding the standard of living, it would escape the disaffection of the intelligentsia, the resentment of the poor, the frustrations of the young—which, historically, had been the signs of disintegration, if not the beginning of revolution, in other societies.”³ Such notions of American uniqueness and superiority have infused the consciousness of American Jews, no less than the nation as a whole, since at least the nineteenth century. They were expressed by native-born Jews such as Emma Lazarus, whose tribute to American exceptionalism, “The New Colossus,” was emblazoned on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty; as well as by immigrant Jews such as Peter Wiernik, the Yiddish journalist who designed a book plate for his library showing a holy ark with a curtain fashioned from an American flag (see Figure 1).

Exceptionalist thinking was especially prevalent around the time of American Jewry’s tercentenary celebrations in 1954, just before Halpern published his essay.⁴ Probably that year’s most sophisticated formulation of American Jewish exceptionalism was Oscar Handlin’s *Adventure in Freedom*, the first comprehensive survey of American Jewish history written by a major U. S. historian. Handlin traced three major lines of development: the attainment of full civil and political equality in the eighteenth century; social and economic integration in the nineteenth century; and the construction of a pluralistic Jewish community between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By immigrating to the United States, Handlin argued, Jews freed themselves from autocratic European governments and stifling aspects of their own communal traditions. “The Atlantic crossing was liberating,” in his judgment. “In every area of life

3. Daniel Bell, “The End of American Exceptionalism,” *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975): 196–97.

4. Arthur A. Goren, “A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews, 1945–1955,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 8 (1992): 10–17; Beth S. Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–14. See also, Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 5 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999): 52–79.

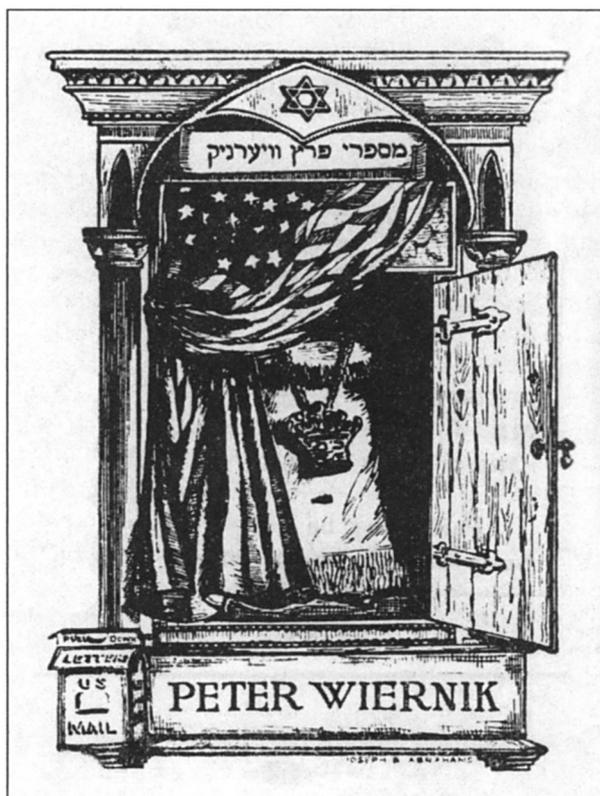


Figure 1. Peter Wiernik's bookplate, depicting his belief in the exceptionalism of American Jewish life. Reproduced from *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, vol. 45 (1955–1956).

the confining regulations fell away and man was left free, within the rules general to all, to pursue his trade and calling, to act as man and citizen without interference from the state. . . . In this spirit, democracy became a way of life that reordered the Jewish communities.” The “products of three centuries of experience in America,” Handlin concluded, were “diversity, voluntarism, equality, freedom, and democracy.”⁵ Jews recast

5. Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 260. On Handlin, see Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 93–118.

themselves through the values, institutions, and practices of liberalism and, in so doing, expanded the boundaries of social inclusion. Handlin thus elevated the American Jewish saga to a level of national importance. The Jewish triumph was America's triumph.

Halpern, too, believed Jews had cause to celebrate, but he sounded an important restraining note absent in *Adventure in Freedom*. Whereas Handlin concluded that American Jewry had reached maturity by the mid-twentieth century, Halpern perceived a community in adolescence. American Jewry was not really 300 years old, as the tercentenary celebrations had it, but merely one-third that age, counting from the onset of mass immigration in the 1840s. In its relatively brief history as a "post-Emancipation Jewry," Halpern argued, American Jewry had yet to develop a firm sense of collective identity and purpose. It had barely begun to think about the challenges posed to group self-definition by a democratic society. Furthermore, Halpern felt a measure of uncertainty about American Jewry's prospects as a vibrant community. A Zionist thinker and activist, he worried that assimilation might erode the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, in which case its adventure would result in failure. The same freedoms that made American Jewish history "different" in a positive sense could eventually render it exceptional in a negative one. Halpern thus gave two cheers for American exceptionalism with the hope of adding a third at some future point.⁶

"America Is Different" articulated the core elements of what has turned out to be the primary framework for understanding American Jewish history. Over subsequent decades, historians have repeatedly asserted the uniqueness of America, often in terms directly or indirectly derived from Halpern's essay.⁷ "American exceptionalism is so common a theme in American Jewish historiography," Jonathan Sarna commented in 1982, "that one would wish to welcome . . . new studies that offer dissenting views."⁸ Three decades later, Sarna's observation remains apt. Few Jewish historians have raised doubts about exceptionalism's descriptive accuracy or explanatory power.⁹ On the contrary, its themes constitute a loosely defined paradigm, structuring and informing how

6. Halpern, "America Is Different," 40.

7. "America Is Different" has been reprinted at least once and cited extensively over the past five decades. See, for example, the reprint in *The Jew in American Society*, ed. Marshall Sklare (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1974), 23–45. In contrast to Halpern's concern about the future of American Jewry, most American Jewish historians have expressed confidence in its capacity for cultural-religious innovation and communal survival. In this sense, Handlin was more in keeping than Halpern with the future development of American Jewish historiography.

8. Jonathan D. Sarna, "America Is Different?" *Midstream* 28 (Feb. 1982): 63.

9. Two exceptions are Frederic Cople Jaher, "American Exceptionalism: The Case of the Jews, 1750–1850" in *Why Is America Different? American Jewry on Its 350th*

scholars understand American Jewish history in its broad dimensions. Beth Wenger's study of the creation of American Jewish heritage provides a recent example. From a standpoint of critical distance, Wenger examines how Jews before World War II fostered a collective identity through public celebrations, pageants, commemorations, sermons, speeches, and historical writings often employing exceptionalist themes and tropes. Yet Wenger also affirms, albeit with some nuances, her subjects' belief in American uniqueness. "While I do not argue that American Jewish life was entirely exceptional," Wenger states at the outset, "there is little doubt that the United States provided an environment for Jews that differed significantly from Jewish experience in most European countries. America not only offered Jews citizenship without any prolonged debate over emancipation . . . but [it] also lacked a medieval past and a legacy of Jewish persecution. America's emphasis on individual rights and the guarantee of separation between church and state afforded Jews an unprecedented sense of security. Although they certainly harbored occasional doubts about the promises of America, the overwhelming majority of Jews came to believe that the nation had indeed ushered in a new epoch in Jewish history." Wenger is in good company. At a 2004 conference held on the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in America and dedicated to the question, "Why Is America Different?," Hasia Diner observed, "[W]e the historians have spent this year, if we admitted it or not, detailing both the exceptionalism of America and the contributions of the Jews to America. The titles of our talks, the labels affixed to the exhibitions, and the basic assumptions which underlay our presentations have been that Jews brought something distinctive to America and that America had a particular—and particularly positive—impact upon the Jews. By framing our public discussions around the distinctiveness of the American experience of the Jews, we have reflected a long held view in the field of American Jewish history. America, and the history of its Jews, stood in a class by themselves." Diner did not disagree with exceptionalism in as much as it reflected "the reality that the history of American Jewry has been largely built around the fact of the absence of a process of emancipation. American Jewry never went through this excruciating and excruciatingly long ordeal." Diner set out to explain not how, but why "America did differ." And even though Sarna, in 1982, expressed desire for dissenting opinions, he concluded that America was "different" after all.¹⁰

Anniversary, ed. Steven T. Katz (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 28–53; and Michael N. Dobkowski, "American Anti-Semitism: The Myth and Reality of American Exceptionalism," in Katz, *Why Is America Different?*, 154–68.

10. Wenger, *History Lessons*, 10, 20–37; Diner, "Why and How Are Americans Different?" in Katz, *Why Is America Different?*, 56–58; Sarna, "America Is Different?" 63.

The ongoing primacy of American Jewish exceptionalism cannot, of course, be attributed solely to Halpern's essay, its cogency notwithstanding. Certain undeniable realities have played the decisive role. Since the end of World War II, American Jews have achieved remarkable levels of economic success, social integration, political power, and cultural influence. Even if some scholars and commentators have exaggerated the extent of such achievements, nobody would deny that Jews, on the whole, have done quite well in the United States. When considered against the backdrop of the Holocaust, the upward trajectory of American Jews can only seem all the more impressive. On one side of the Atlantic: genocide. On the other: acceptance and success.¹¹ Those contrasting fates have reinforced American Jewish exceptionalism to the point where it has become almost beyond question. In retrospect, it seems painfully obvious that the respective histories of Jews in the United States and Europe bear little resemblance to one another.

But is American Jewish history really "different," in the sense meant by Halpern and subsequent scholars? There is strong circumstantial evidence available from other fields to think not. In general U.S. historical scholarship, the heyday of American exceptionalism passed decades ago. As early as 1959, John Higham published a penetrating (if not completely judicious) critique of the so-called "consensus historians" who rose to prominence in the years following the Second World War as interpreters of America's national character. These historians, a number of whom, such as Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, and Richard Hofstadter, were Jews and former Marxists who sought to understand the durability, as they saw it, of American political traditions. Why had classically liberal precepts dominated? Why had the socialist left and the reactionary right failed to mount serious challenges? What explained the stability of America's political system? The consensus historians, though by no means uniform in their interpretations and at times sharply critical of one another, attributed the country's nearly unanimous belief in individual liberty and republican democracy to the fact that the United States was unburdened by legacies of clericalism, monarchism, and feudalism.¹²

11. Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last of the 20th Century* (Seattle: Univ. of Washing Press, 1995), 16–50; David A. Hollinger, *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 135–65; Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 641–71.

12. On differences between Boorstin and Hartz regarding the role of ideas in American history, for instance, see Mark Hulliung, "Louis Hartz: His Day and Ours," in *The American Liberal Tradition Reconsidered: The Contested Legacy of Louis Hartz*, ed. Mark Hulliung (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010), 38–42. See also, David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

The “genius of American democracy,” Boorstin wrote in an especially celebratory vein in 1953, comes from “the unprecedented opportunities of this continent and from a peculiar and unrepeatably combination of historical circumstances.”¹³ Although Hartz and Hofstadter cast a critical eye on American political traditions, they agreed with Boorstin that liberal values and institutions permanently defined the political contours of the United States, for better or worse.¹⁴

In response, Higham criticized the “cult of consensus” for “carrying out a massive grading operation to smooth over America’s social convulsions.” In their discovery of a “placid, unexciting past,” Higham charged, the consensus historians dispensed with important moral values: “an appreciation of the crusading spirit, a responsiveness to indignation, a sense of injustice.” Higham wished for a new paradigm, though he did not recommend an alternative.¹⁵ A decade later, a legion of young, self-described radical historians (whom Higham would also take issue with) interrogated and rejected exceptionalism’s presuppositions and claims. In the midst of large-scale social, political, and cultural upheavals, followed by economic recession and decline in America’s hegemony overseas, notions of national cohesion and superiority no longer seemed convincing

2006), 3–119; Michael Kraus and David D. Joyce, *The Writing of American History*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 311–29; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 332–60.

13. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 1.

14. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), 3–32; Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), v–xi. See also, Daniel Joseph Singal, “Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 89 (Oct. 1984): 976–1004; John Patrick Diggins, “Knowledge and Sorrow: Louis Hartz’s Quarrel with American History,” *Political Theory* 16 (Aug. 1988): 355–76.

15. John Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History,” *Commentary* 27 (Feb. 1959): 94, 100. In a later article, Higham argued that the Jewish backgrounds of the leading consensus historians played an important role in shaping their perspectives. Historians such as Boorstin, Hartz, and Hofstadter were children of immigrant Jews who had moved from social marginality during the Great Depression to the heights of academia after World War II. Having risen to the top of a profession that had all but excluded Jews prior to the 1940s, the consensus historians could see themselves as living proof of liberalism’s triumph in the United States, and this just a few short years after the destruction of European Jewry. “How could they avoid perceiving the United States an increasingly inclusive society resting on a universalistic value system?” Higham asked. “And in looking abroad, how could they fail to contrast American success and affluence with the catastrophes of Europe?” See Higham, “Changing Paradigms,” 460–66; and “The Future of American History,” *Journal of American History* 80 (Mar. 1994): 1289–1307.

to large numbers of scholars. Radical historians, who, by the 1980s, had captured the “commanding heights” (to quote Carl Degler) of the U. S. field, focused on formations of hierarchy along axes of race, class, and gender, and on resistance by oppressed and marginal groups.¹⁶ Historians of labor, for instance, devoted great energy to uncovering powerful traditions of class-consciousness and militancy in order to debunk the idea, central to American exceptionalism, that workers accepted capitalism with little complaint.¹⁷ Notions of exceptionalism never disappeared entirely, but they have lost much of their credibility in the years since this revisionist approach took hold. Today, U.S. historians engaged in comparative work often discuss America’s differences from other countries, but they rarely employ the vocabulary of exceptionalism. Although the radical history movement long ago subsided, Americanists continue to challenge claims of national uniqueness or ignore them altogether.¹⁸

The fact that American Jewish exceptionalism no longer fits within the mainstream of U. S. historical writing does not necessarily render it invalid. Even so, the discrepancy gives reason for pause. If the case for American uniqueness writ large has lost much of its persuasiveness, then American Jewish exceptionalism might also require reevaluation. To do so would entail systematic comparison between the United States and other countries, something the exceptionalist mode discourages. For instead of asking, in an open-ended manner, how the experiences of Jews in one country might have resembled or diverged from those in another, the exceptionalist mode counterposes the United States to “Europe,” a single country against an entire continent. Monarchies, democracies, dictatorships, nation-states, and multinational empires become lumped together. Genuine comparison, however, requires criteria for evaluation. Should we compare the United States to other English-speaking countries, to any and all democracies, or to countries with large Jewish populations

16. Alice Kessler-Harris, “Social History,” in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 233–34; Carl N. Degler, “What Crisis, Jon?” *Journal of American History* 76 (Sep. 1989): 470.

17. Eric Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?” *History Workshop Journal* 17 (Spring 1984): 57–80; Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984): 1–24; Aristide R. Zolberg, “How Many Exceptionalisms?” in *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 397–455.

18. See, for instance, William J. Novak, “The Myth of the ‘Weak’ American State,” *American Historical Review* 113 (Jun. 2008): 752–72. For a survey of exceptionalist discourse over time, see Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45 (Mar. 1993): 1–43.

regardless of the political regimes under which they lived? And what is an appropriate time frame? Should comparison begin with the founding of the American republic and conclude with the Holocaust? Or should it continue past World War II to the more benign present? Or should we use a different temporal gauge, one that compares Jewish communities at similar points in their histories? Does it make sense to compare an old community, such as Polish Jewry, to a new one? Perhaps it would be fruitful to compare Jewish communities across time but according to corresponding ages, let us say, the first 350 years of American Jewry with the first 350 years of Polish Jewry? Without genuine comparison between individual countries, selected on the basis of explicit criteria, within specific time periods, the extent to which America and “Europe” actually differed from one another cannot be determined.¹⁹

Furthermore, scholarship on European Jewry suggests not only that comparisons are in order, but also that Jewish communities on both sides of the Atlantic have followed similar trajectories over the course of the modern era, from the eighteenth century to the present. Historians of England, France, Germany, and other countries have uncovered similar patterns of upward economic mobility, social and political integration, and selective acculturation (as distinct from assimilation), all of which are prominent themes in American Jewish historiography.²⁰ Scholarship on imperial Russia has further eroded the divide between Europe and America. In his study of Odessa, Steven Zipperstein likened this famously unrestrained port city to Chicago and San Francisco, finding that Jews participated prominently in Odessa’s civic and political life, faced few residential restrictions, and, to a significant extent, prospered economically. True, Zipperstein differentiated Odessa’s tolerant atmosphere from

19. For an unusually sustained comparative analysis, see Ira Katznelson, “Between Separation and Disappearance: Jews on the Margins of American Liberalism,” in *Paths to Emancipation: Jews, States, Citizenship*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 157–205.

20. Todd M. Endelman, “The Legitimization of the Diaspora Experience in Recent Jewish Historiography,” *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991): 195–209; Jonathan Frankel, “Assimilation and the Jews in Nineteenth Century Europe: Towards a New Historiography,” in *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth Century Europe*, ed. Frankel and Steven J. Zipperstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–37; David Rechter, “Western and Central European Jewry in The Modern Period, 1750–1933,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 376–95; Reinhard Rurup, “A Success Story and Its Limits: European Jewish Social History in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 11 (Fall 2004): 3–15. Such advances did not occur exclusively in democratic countries. On Hungary, for example, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 92.

that of other Russian cities and, at the same time, paid attention to the limits of its toleration, as demonstrated by the city's 1871 pogrom. Still, Zipperstein drew a portrait of a socially and culturally dynamic Jewish community of the kind we might find in any number of western countries. Furthermore, in light of more recent scholarship, Odessa no longer seems unique among Russian cities. Benjamin Nathans, in his study of the Jews of St. Petersburg, uncovered significant degrees of social integration (in the legal and medical professions, for instance), acculturation, and economic advancement. Of Kiev, Natan Meier writes: "To a surprising degree, Jews became Russian, participated in municipal life, and interacted with their Russian neighbors."²¹ These works, among others, demonstrate that even in supposedly backward Russia, Jews experienced processes of modernization typically associated with (which is not to say identical to) those in western, democratic countries.

We could move our time frame much earlier to medieval Poland in order to make a similar point. While Poland in many respects was an unfriendly country to Jews in the modern period, overall this trend came somewhat late in the history of Polish Jewry. The first charter issued to Jews in 1264 contained no restrictions on rights of residence or economic activity, and established the principle of Jewish juridical and communal autonomy that would blossom into a highly elaborate communal structure over the following five centuries. For much of that long time period, despite encountering some prejudices and restrictions, Jews enjoyed economic prosperity and physical security, leading them to develop a strong sense of "at-homeness." As Gershon Hundert argues, "both Polish Jews and their Christian neighbors shared the sense that Jews were permanently settled in the land." Indeed, Jews created various myths of origin that attributed their presence in Poland to divine will, a perspective that might be called Polish Jewish exceptionalism.²²

The problem is not so much that the exceptionalist mode denies similarities between American and European Jewries, but that it simply ignores them for the purpose of delineating differences and identifying their causes. The key difference most often cited or implied is antisemitism, that is, bias, discrimination, or violence against Jews. According to the

21. Steven Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794–1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Natan M. Meir, *Kiev: A Jewish Metropolis: A History, 1859–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 151. See also David Sorkin, "Beyond the East-West Divide: Rethinking the Narrative of the Jews' Political Status in Europe, 1600–1750," *Jewish History* 24 (2010): 247–56.

22. Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 6–20, esp. 6–12 (quotation, 8–9); Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia, 1350–1881* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 39.

exceptionalist paradigm, antisemitism plagued European Jews, but played a negligible role in the United States for the reasons cited by Halpern, starting with the granting of civil rights to Jews without an emancipation process. Exceptionalism thus seeks to account for what supposedly did not happen in the United States as measured against “Europe.” If the quintessential question posed by American exceptionalism asks, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” the parallel question in Jewish historiography asks, “Why is there no antisemitism in the United States?” Both variants of exceptionalism suffer from a similar flaw: they attempt to explain a presumed absence rather than what actually happened. Toward that end, both exceptionalisms exaggerate differences between the United States and European countries while minimizing or ignoring similarities. Underneath both lies an unacknowledged standard. When historians speak of “Europe,” what they usually have in mind are certain countries and, more often than not, Germany—the birthplace of Marxism and Nazism—is chief among them.

A reconsideration of American Jewish exceptionalism must, therefore, address the subject of antisemitism, the relative lack of which is understood to be the defining aspect of American difference. Not surprisingly, specialists in American Jewish history have produced very few studies of antisemitism and attach little importance to it in their scholarship.²³ A consensus holds that antisemitism, while occasionally worrisome, has rarely turned violent, rarely entered into the country’s politics, rarely resulted in practical consequences, and, therefore, is hardly worthy of consideration. “[A]n interpretation that stresses persecution,” writes Stephen Whitfield, “in a nation that has known no pogroms, is unlikely to be convincing. A paradigm that is written in terms of martyrdom, when no American Jew has been seriously impeded in his faith, does not address itself to our condition in America.” For Whitfield, antisemitism is “the dog that did not bark.”²⁴ No reasonable historian would quarrel with Whitfield’s warning against *leidensgeschichte*, but one may question his maximal conception of antisemitism as a phenomenon that mat-

23. See, for instance, Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1–9; Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second-Generation New York Jews* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1981), 3–17; and Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 1–9. All three authors mention or briefly discuss the existence of antisemitism during the interwar period, but none grant it sustained attention, despite its marked increase in the 1920s and 1930s.

24. Stephen J. Whitfield, “The Presence of the Past: Recent Trends,” *American Jewish History* 70 (Dec. 1980): 151. See also, Henry L. Feingold, “Anti-Semitism and the Anti-Semitic Imagination in America: A Case Study, the 1920s,” in *Midrash on American Jewish History*, ed. Henry Feingold (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982), 177–87; Halpern, *The American Jew: A Zionist Analysis*, 11–33.

ters only when Jews are under threat of persecution or death.²⁵ To be sure, one must keep in mind the worst forms of antisemitism in order to maintain a measured perspective, but to use catastrophe as the sole measure can cause distortions. To suggest that university quotas or job discrimination were mere nuisances undeserving of historical attention is, in effect, to render trivial the experiences of the people we study.

There exists a considerable body of literature on antisemitism in the United States, produced mainly by scholars trained in fields other than Jewish history, and it yields a picture different from the one presented by most Jewish historians. Taken together, this scholarship shows that American antisemitism assumed forms and patterns similar to that in significant portions of Europe. American antisemitism increased in intensity and popularity from the mid-nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century; it extended beyond the social realm into political and governmental spheres; and it turned violent more frequently than we usually recognize. Antisemitism in the United States certainly did not reach the worst levels of Jew-hatred in Europe, but it was serious enough to undermine claims of American uniqueness. By the same token, antisemitism in Europe was not uniformly severe across time and place, something which American Jewish historians also tend to lose sight of. American antisemitism can be placed on a spectrum upon which its position shifted over time in relation to European countries, whose positions also shifted.

The standard characterization of American antisemitism as nonviolent, nonpolitical, and fleeting is faulty to varying degrees. To begin with the subject of violence, it is, of course, true that large-scale killing of Jews has never occurred in the United States, but it is mistaken to presume that violence was the norm throughout modern Europe. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, violence flared up at certain times and in certain places, but not in every country across the board. Jews in England, Holland, and Italy, for instance, suffered little or no violence. Anti-Jewish riots did take place in German-speaking lands at certain times, but they did not typify German Jewish life prior to the Nazi period. In France, the Dreyfus Affair unleashed demonstrations and attacks against Jews in 1898, but authorities suppressed them, no Jews lost their lives, and no manifestations recurred. While pogroms raged throughout the Ukraine between 1881 and 1882, and sporadically into 1884, they were largely unknown in the northwest region of the Russian

25. It is worth pointing out that in regard to matters of Jewish community and culture, American Jewish historians have rightly rejected using European standards to evaluate their legitimacy or authenticity.

empire, the area of densest Jewish settlement.²⁶ The worst instances of violence occurred in combat zones during wartime. The slaughter that took place in the Ukraine during the Russian Civil War of 1918–1920, resulting in more than 100,000 dead, according to reliable estimates, provides a gruesome example.²⁷ Poland, immediately following World War I and during the Second World War, offers other terrible examples that require no elaboration here. Still, it is worth mentioning in connection with Poland that the destruction of Europe’s largest Jewish community began only with the invasion by Nazi Germany. With that in mind, the salient difference between the United States and “Europe” is not that the latter perpetrated genocide and the former did not. The key difference is that the United States, unlike Poland and Germany’s other neighbors, was not conquered by an antisemitic country bent on the destruction of the Jews. If Nazi Germany had somehow invaded the United States but Americans had actively resisted its anti-Jewish policies, then a strong case could be made for American exceptionalism. But, as it happened, America made no substantial rescue efforts until the tail end of the Nazi period. If there was a truly exceptional country in its response to Nazi antisemitism it was Denmark.

American Jews have indeed been spared the most extreme forms of violence: this is beyond question. Still, violence against Jews has occurred often enough to merit consideration. Well known examples include the “whitecapping” attacks against Jewish merchants in Mississippi (early 1890s); the riot against Rabbi Jacob Joseph’s funeral procession through the Lower East Side (1902); the lynching of Leo Frank in Georgia (1915); the Peekskill riot against Communists, many of them Jews and African Americans, in upstate New York (1947); and the bombings of synagogues, Jewish community centers, and the homes of rabbis in the South during the 1950s and 1960s (eight between 1957 and 1958 alone).²⁸ Other

26. Claire Le Foll, “The Missing Pogroms of Belorussia, 1881–1882: Conditions and Motives of an Absence of Violence,” in *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, ed. John Dekel-Chen, David Gaunt, Natan M. Meir, and Israel Bartal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 159–73.

27. Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the Whites, 1917–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 216–73.

28. William F. Holmes, “Whitecapping: Anti-Semitism in the Populist Era,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63 (March 1974): 244–61; Leonard Dinnerstein, “The Funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph,” in *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 275–301; Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Nancy MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” *Journal of American History* 78 (Dec. 1991): 917–48; Stuart Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York:

examples could be added to the list. An obscure, but ugly, incident occurred in North Carolina in 1925 when a dozen men kidnapped a Jewish man accused of rape and castrated him. Law enforcement officials and upstanding civic leaders participated in the crime.²⁹ Stephen Norwood has documented the frequent, at times quite brutal, attacks on Jews in northeastern cities, such as Boston, New York, and Providence, carried out by members of the Christian Front during the early 1940s. In Boston, beatings of Jews were “an almost daily occurrence,” the *New York Post* reported in 1943. In an appeal to the Massachusetts governor, a state senator described Jews in his district as living “in mortal fear.”³⁰ And a much greater number of individual Jews suffered spontaneous harassment and assault beyond the low-level street violence typical of rough-and-tumble American cities. The aforementioned examples of violence, it bears repeating, paled in comparison to Ukrainian pogroms or Nazi genocide, but that does not necessarily vitiate their importance in the history of American Jews.

The second faulty claim about antisemitism is its alleged absence from American politics, government agencies, and public policy. It is true that antisemitic political parties have utterly failed in the United States, but antisemitic parties also failed in any number of European countries prior to the First World War. In Germany, antisemitic parties scored few victories before the Nazi rise to power, winning just five seats in the Reichstag in 1890, climbing to sixteen in 1893, and declining to six in 1912.³¹ In 1914 not a single party devoted to antisemitism existed in western or central Europe. Jews lost none of the legal rights or social and economic gains won over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth

Columbia University Press, 1997), 135–48. On the bombings, see Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 190; Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 6; Moore, *To the Golden Cities*, 163–64; and Adam Mendelsohn, “Two Far South: Rabbinical Responses to Apartheid and Segregation in South Africa and the American South,” *Southern Jewish History* 6 (2003): 68–73.

29. Vann Newkirk, “That Spirit Must be Stamped Out: The Mutilation of Joseph Needleman and North Carolina’s Effort to Prosecute Lynch Mob Participants During the 1920s,” *Southern Jewish History* 13 (2010): 45–80.

30. Stephen Norwood, “Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York During World War II,” *American Jewish History* 91 (Jun. 2003): 233. On antisemitic violence in Boston during the 1930s and 1940s, see also Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957–1965* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 2006), 32–33. On the Christian Front, see Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 120–23.

31. Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews in Modern Times* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 222, 230; Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), 202–208.

centuries. The most successful example of an antisemitic politician prior to World War I was Karl Lueger, the mayor of Vienna from 1897 to 1910. Lueger used anti-Jewish appeals to win elections, but his antisemitism was mostly rhetorical, described by Amos Elon as “of a homespun, flexible variety.”³² Lueger favored exclusion of Jews from municipal contracts and public employment, and the restriction of Jewish immigration from Russia and Rumania. But Austrian legislatures passed no antisemitic laws during this period.³³ Furthermore, in light of the restrictive quotas put in place by the U.S. Congress in 1921 and 1924, Lueger’s proposals do not seem unusually extreme, sadly enough. Probably no single piece of legislation enacted by the federal government had a greater effect on American and European Jews than the immigration restriction acts of those years. Congress did not single out Jews for exclusion, but antisemitic biases fed overall nativist and racist sentiments that resulted in restrictive legislation. Witness the State Department’s Consular Service report to Congress in 1920 stating that the typical Polish Jew was “physically deficient,” “mentally deficient,” “economically undesirable,” and “socially undesirable.”³⁴ In the opinion of Representative Albert Johnson, chair of the House Immigration Committee, hordes of “abnormally twisted” and “unassimilable” European Jews, “filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits,” threatened to overrun American society.³⁵ The State Department zealously enforced immigration quotas through the 1930s and 1940s, to the peril of thousands of European Jews. True, the extent to which antisemitism determined policy decisions is a matter of historical debate, but, even those who discount the role of prejudice as a primary factor nonetheless do not dismiss it altogether and acknowledge strong antisemitic feelings among high-level officials. Whatever the exact relationship of anti-Jewish sentiment to immigration policy, the association between the two was, at the very least, uncomfortably close.³⁶

32. Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch, 1743–1933* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 224.

33. Richard S. Levy, “Political Antisemitism in Germany and Austria, 1848–1914,” in *Antisemitism: A History*, ed. Albert S. Lindemann and Richard S. Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 134.

34. The consular report was incorporated into the report of the House Immigration Committee, which is quoted in Robert Michael, *A Concise History of American Antisemitism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 135.

35. Quoted in Roger Daniels, *Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890–1924* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 133.

36. Alan M. Kraut and Richard D. Breitman, “Anti-Semitism in the State Department, 1933–44: Four Case Studies,” in Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History*, 167–97. The authors write on page 169: “That anti-Semitism existed in the State Department is incontrovertible, but it is far less clear that anti-Semitism was the primary motivation behind State Department policies affecting Jewish refugees.”

One could cite many examples of hostility toward Jews in the American political arena. Right-wing anti-Communism provided especially fertile soil for antisemitism in the United States, as it did in Europe. In Minnesota, Republicans conducted a “blatant and flagrant” antisemitic campaign that invoked the specter of “Jew-Communists” to unseat the Farmer-Labor governor in 1938.³⁷ During the 1950s, members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities singled out Jews (“Communist kikes,” in the words of Congressman John Rankin) for opprobrium on the grounds that “Communism is Yiddish.” The committee cannot be dismissed as inconsequential, given its record of ruining careers and damaging personal lives through the power of subpoena, hearings, and pressure on employers.³⁸ California State Senator Jack Tenney, an outspoken antisemite and chair of the legislature’s committee on subversive activities, conducted investigations into Jewish communal organizations in Los Angeles that resulted in a purge of suspected Communists from the city’s Jewish Community Council.³⁹ In the U. S. Army, antisemitism, anti-Communism, and anti-Zionism merged to create a “functioning anti-Semitic worldview” throughout the officer corps between the 1910s and 1950s, according to Joseph Bendersky’s study of the Army’s military intelligence division. Officers viewed Jews in racist terms and believed they posed a threat to national security. “The anti-Semitism of army officers,” Bendersky writes, “had an important impact on critical legal and policy decisions concerning immigration, the fate of European Jews during and after the Holocaust, and the establishment of the state of Israel.”⁴⁰

Political antisemitism never prevented American Jews from being integrated into the major political parties or from holding public office. Indeed, in the 1930s, Jews became incorporated into the federal government through the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party on a larger scale than ever before. Yet political integration was not unique to American Jews. In Soviet Russia, Jews were highly represented, far out of proportion to their share of the general population, in the upper

37. Hyman Berman, “Political Anti-Semitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression,” *Jewish Social Studies* 38 (Summer–Autumn 1976): 247. On antisemitic attitudes among congressmen during the 1940s, see Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 135–36.

38. On Rankin, see Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 109–121; and Edward S. Shapiro, “Anti-Semitism, Mississippi Style,” in Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History*, 129–51. On the connection between antisemitism and anti-Communism, see Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice*, 113–34.

39. Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L. A.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 201–212.

40. Joseph W. Bendersky, *The “Jewish Threat”: Anti-Semitic Politics of the U.S. Army* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xvi–xvii.

echelons of the Communist Party, state bureaucracies, and secret police. “From the inception of the revolution,” Yuri Slezkine writes, “the unique combination of exceptionally high literacy rates and a remarkable degree of political loyalty . . . had made Jews the backbone of the new Soviet bureaucracy.”⁴¹ In western and central European countries, Jews became fully integrated into the main liberal and socialist parties between the 1870s and 1914. Jews held prominent political positions in France, including the office of prime minister, in the case of Leon Blum in the 1930s.⁴² In Poland during the interwar period a much unhappier situation prevailed. Jews faced escalating levels of xenophobic, Catholic, and often antisemitic nationalism, and most joined independent Jewish parties rather than the majority Polish parties.⁴³ Thus levels of political integration differed according to time and place. In Poland, Jews found themselves marginalized politically. In west-central Europe, as in the United States, the overall trend moved toward full political inclusion up to the Nazis’ rise to power in 1933.

Antisemitism in the United States spread most widely, all historians would agree, in the social realm. The scholarship on antisemitism shows that anti-Jewish attitudes, policies, and behaviors were common since the early decades of the American republic. Furthermore, it increased over an extended period of time, paralleling the rapid growth of America’s Jewish population. John Higham found, in a seminal article on social discrimination against Jews, that a “whole system of anti-Semitic discrimination was worked out by 1917.” Over the following two decades, this system expanded. To quote Eric Goldstein, “white Americans of the interwar period were increasingly convinced that Jews represented a distinct ‘problem’ in American life.”⁴⁴ From the 1920s through the 1940s, discrimination against Jews in hiring, housing, education, social clubs, and elsewhere became pervasive and institutionalized. Restrictive

41. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 224.

42. On Blum, see Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 148–49; Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 29–86.

43. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 32–63.

44. Stanley F. Chyet, “The Political Rights of the Jews in the United States, 1776–1840,” in *Critical Studies in American Jewish History*, ed. Jacob R. Marcus (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1971), 3:27–88; David A. Gerber, “Cutting Out Shylock: Elite Anti-Semitism and the Quest for Moral Order in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Marketplace,” in Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History*, 201–32; Jaher, “American Exceptionalism,” 38–46; John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 157; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 119.

covenants blocked Jews from buying homes in many places. Quotas drove down the number of Jewish students accepted into colleges, universities, and professional schools.⁴⁵ Radio waves transmitted Father Charles Coughlin's antisemitic broadcasts to around 30 million regular listeners every week in the 1930s.⁴⁶ A national discourse about the culturally corrupting role of Jews through their "control" of the motion picture industry, termed "the Hollywood Question" by Steven Carr, became widespread.⁴⁷ Employers often refused to hire Jews as a matter of policy and workers expressed extreme prejudice as well. According to a 1944 study conducted by the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), "an embarrassing amount of prejudice existed among trade union members." After reading the committee's 1300-page report, Daniel Bell, who served as a consultant on the study, published an essay arguing that the "country where anti-Semitism can emerge in the most violent shape and unabated fury is the United States." The JLC decided not to publish the report so as to avoid causing harm to organized labor.⁴⁸ Between 1933 and 1941 more than one hundred explicitly antisemitic organizations were created, all of which failed as political parties, but succeeded in injecting Nazi-like accusations into American public life.⁴⁹

45. On social and economic exclusion, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1992), 116–20; Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 59–104; Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 300–34, 450–58. On anti-Jewish discrimination on college campuses, see Dan Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 173–214; David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspirations, 1915–1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 137–61; Jonathan Z. S. Pollack, "Jewish Problems: Eastern and Western Jewish Identities in Conflict at the University of Wisconsin, 1919–1941," *American Jewish History* 89 (June 2001): 161–80; Robert Shaffer, "Jews, Reds, and Violets: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Radicalism at New York University, 1916–1929," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 15 (1987): 47–83; Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 222–52; Harvey Strum, "Louis Marshall and Anti-Semitism at Syracuse University," *American Jewish Archives* 35 (April 1983): 1–12; Margaret Graham Synnott, "Anti-Semitism and American Universities: Did Quotas Follow the Jews?" in Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History*, 233–76.

46. Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 118.

47. Steven Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–20.

48. Daniel Bell, "The Face of Tomorrow: The Grass Roots of American Jew Hatred," *Jewish Frontier* 11 (Jun. 1944): 15. For a discussion of the report, see Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 117–18. On job discrimination, see Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 88.

49. Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 112; Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 450–58.

The previously cited examples are not meant to erase distinctions or to promote a gloomy version of American Jewish history, but rather to underscore the need for a nuanced interpretive framework that could recognize the seriousness of antisemitism in American history within proper bounds. According to the exceptionalist paradigm, America's liberal constitutional order and pluralistic character prevented the development of serious antisemitism. Yet, in fact, discrimination, bias, and even violence against Jews grew more pernicious over time, peaking during the 1930s and 1940s. Exceptionalism fails to explain this historical development. In as much as antisemitism escalated past the era of immigration, then American Jews were indeed exceptional, not in comparison with European Jews, but vis-à-vis other white ethnic Americans. Drawing an important contrast between the two, John Higham writes, "whereas other European groups generally gained respect as assimilation improved their status, the Jews reaped more and more dislike as they bettered themselves. The more avidly they reached out for acceptance and participation in American life, the more their reputation seemed to suffer."⁵⁰ Even Oscar Handlin, who considered antisemitism a minor factor throughout most of American Jewish history, acknowledged its seriousness during the 1920s and 1930s. The interwar years "revealed the Jews had long been treading in isolation along the edge of a precarious abyss."⁵¹ American antisemitism had real consequences, caused justified concerns, and affected patterns of behavior in ways that warrant examination.

Viewed from the vantage point of, say, the 1920s, was America uniquely benevolent? White Christians continued to erect barriers against Jews and would continue to do so through the following decade. Yet in Weimar Germany, Jews enjoyed a higher level of social inclusion and cultural participation than ever before, despite the country's unstable postwar economy.⁵² In Soviet Russia, the Bolsheviks outlawed anti-Semitism and Jews flooded into the state bureaucracy and enjoyed official recognition as a national minority.⁵³ Thousands of American Jews looked

50. John Higham, "Social Discrimination Against Jews in America, 1830-1930," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 47 (Sep. 1957): 28.

51. Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom*, 231.

52. Michael Brenner, "The Weimar Years (1919-1932)," in *Jews in Berlin*, ed. Andreas Nachama, Julius H. Schoeps, and Hermann Simon (Leipzig, Germany: Seemann Henschel, 2003), 137-77.

53. Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 49-137; David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-13; Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 165-254.

at Soviet Russia from afar, and sometimes up close, and concluded that no better place in the world existed for Jews. Thus the secretary of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Joseph Schlossberg, who was not a Communist, contrasted America with Russia in 1921:

My people ran away from Russia, driven by the monster in the throne room. . . . Outcasts from their own country, they came to America and built new homes here. . . . That was yesterday. To-day the hospitable gates of America are no longer open. To-day they are closed, locked and barred. Fortunately, there is no more czarism in Russia, and that country is no longer driving its best children into exile.⁵⁴

At a time of rising antisemitism and xenophobia in the United States, Russia seemed to Schlossberg poised to surpass the United States as the most congenial home for Jews—a radical idea that struck at the very self-conception of the United States as a haven for the oppressed, which, in fact, it ceased to be in 1924.

By the 1960s, in the aftermath of Nazi devastation and amid the expansion of Soviet totalitarianism, the world came to look much different than it had three decades earlier. Nobody could doubt that the United States proved hospitable to Jews to an unprecedented degree. However, the extent the postwar era was a “golden age,” this should not be viewed as foreordained—the inevitable result of American democracy—but as the product of an extraordinary set of factors that converged in the three decades after World War II. The main factors were: (1) the general, if not total, discrediting of antisemitism caused by the defeat of Nazi Germany and its allies; (2) the unprecedented and as yet unrepeated expansion of the U.S. economy between the 1940s and early-1970s; (3) the passage of civil rights legislation at the state and federal levels, culminating in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965; and (4) the advent of the Cold War, which resulted in a coincidence, although not a full overlap, of interests between American Jews and the United States in foreign affairs, specifically in matters related to the state of Israel and the cause of Soviet Jewry. In other words, what may be regarded as unique or exceptional was not U.S. history as a whole, but the post-World War II era specifically. That the United States did not fully welcome its Jewish citizens until after the near-destruction of European Jewry—a catastrophe in which the United States was implicated by its refusal to revise its immigration laws—should be considered sufficient reason to question claims about America’s unique inclusiveness. Furthermore, significant

54. Joseph Schlossberg, “From the Ex-Czar’s Throne Room to the Amalgamated,” *Advance* (New York), Jul. 22, 1921, 4.

blemishes marred even the postwar era: manifest antisemitism amid the anti-Communist crusade; assaults against Jews and Jewish institutions as part of the racist backlash against the civil rights movements; pressures of social and cultural conformity; conflicts, occasionally violent, between Jews and African Americans; and, within the New Left, the emergence of an anti-Zionist current that all too often spilled over into antisemitism and, in any case, caused considerable anguish among Jewish campus activists. None of these unfortunate developments impeded the overall march of postwar Jews toward material success and security, but they affected Jews in important ways, from where they lived to how they defined themselves politically.⁵⁵

In short, Jewish historians would do well to retire American exceptionalism. Although it purports to explain major differences between American and European Jewish histories, exceptionalism actually distorts more than it clarifies. According to the exceptionalist paradigm, America's dominant liberal tradition created a "post-emancipation" Jewry able to flourish like no other. Yet, in fact, Jews in various European countries traveled on paths toward acculturation, middle class occupations, social integration, and political inclusion comparable to that of Jews in the United States. Extreme forms of anti-Jewish persecution erupted periodically in Europe, but they did not plague the continent uniformly; antisemitism varied significantly according to time and place. At the same time, prejudice and hostility toward American Jews grew in intensity and scope from the late-nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth, as it did in Europe. Such parallels and divergences require sustained comparative examination, a lacuna in American Jewish historiography. The exceptionalist mode gestures toward a comparative approach, but it actually runs counter to a genuinely comparative method in that it presumes differences at the outset and seeks to explain them by way of reference to a generalized "Europe," which serves as a mere foil. Exceptionalism consequently exaggerates differences and minimizes similarities between Jewries on both sides of the Atlantic.

55. Mordecai S. Chertoff, ed., *The New Left and the Jews* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1971); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 204–255; Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 127–201; Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon, *The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 194–330; Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier, eds., *Jewish Radicalism: A Selected Anthology* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1973); Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 142–245; Jonathan Reider, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 57–263.

The same point applies to emancipation, the lynchpin of American Jewish exceptionalism. The case for American uniqueness rests on the claim that American Jews never underwent a process of emancipation and, therefore, never had to confront a persistent “Jewish Question” that challenged their civic and political rights. Yet even this seemingly obvious and irrefutable difference requires scrutiny. Indeed, scholars in other fields have done just that. Ira Katznelson, a leading historian of American political development, has argued that although formal emancipation never took place in the United States, immigrant Jews (he did not discuss American-born generations) underwent a kind of ad hoc emancipation as they crossed the ocean and encountered American society. Coming from countries (Germany and imperial Russia, in Katznelson’s analysis) in which they suffered discrimination and persecution, immigrant Jews experienced feelings, emotions, and concerns (insecurity, self-consciousness, desire for acceptance, and so on) associated with a formal emancipation process. Depending on when and where immigrants arrived, they dealt with restrictions and prejudices unsanctioned by the federal government, but operative nonetheless. Katznelson certainly viewed the United States as comparatively benign, but he also stressed the salience of “ugly entanglements” with American society. Opportunities co-existed alongside prejudice, and these varied “with respect to the development of American capitalism, the qualities of state-building, and the extensiveness of anti-Jewish reactions.” In other words, America’s liberal regime granted Jews legal equality, but did not guarantee an easy, smooth journey into the social, cultural, and political mainstream, as the exceptionalist paradigm would have it. Immigrants encountered a country at once “welcoming and menacing,” depending on time and place, and they reacted accordingly. Immigrants thus experienced emancipation as a “self-generated act,” influenced both by their backgrounds in Europe and conditions in America. This sort of emancipation differed from the more familiar kind associated with France or Germany, but, according to Katznelson, it constituted an emancipation process nonetheless.⁵⁶

David Sorkin, writing as a European Jewish historian, has mounted an even more direct challenge to the characterization of American Jews as a “post-emancipation Jewry.” Sorkin draws attention to the fact that full political equality did not come to Jews automatically as a consequence of the American revolution. Restrictions from the colonial era continued at the state level well into the nineteenth century, even as Jews enjoyed full rights at the federal level. Sorkin argues further that the process of obtaining legal equality in colonial and post-revolutionary America

56. Katznelson, “Between Separation and Disappearance,” 168–70.

was not *sui generis* but resembled the European “port Jew” model. The parallel drawn by Sorkin between American Jews and port Jewries in Europe undermines the very basis of American Jewish exceptionalism. For if American Jews obtained civic and political equality in ways similar to certain European Jewish communities, then the case for American uniqueness collapses. The closer one scrutinizes exceptionalism, the less convincing it becomes.⁵⁷

If historians discard notions of national uniqueness, our understanding of American Jewish history would change significantly. To begin with, we would become more inclined to view American Jewish history as part and parcel of modern Jewish history, not merely connected to Europe, but subject to similar—although not identical—economic, political, and intellectual dynamics associated with modernity more broadly. Of course, American Jewish historians have long insisted, especially to Europeanists, that our field deserves recognition as a legitimate branch of the modern Jewish experience. Yet the field’s adherence to ideas of American “difference” has worked against full engagement with Jewish history outside of American borders. The placement of American Jewish history within general dynamics of modernity need not entail a divorce from the U. S. context. It would, however, require altering how American Jewish historiography, in the main, has depicted America. For even as the scholarship on American Jews has grown vastly richer, more diverse in method and subject matter, and more nuanced in interpretation since Handlin and Halpern published their seminal works, the major themes remain in place. The field of American Jewish history continues to share, more or less, the view that a dominant liberal tradition has governed American politics and society since 1776, which is to say, it still adheres to the conception of America articulated so forcefully by the postwar consensus school, but which has since been substantially revised by U.S. historians. Most works of American Jewish history, now as in the past, treat liberalism—its institutions, values, and doctrines—as a given, the departure point and backdrop shaping how Jews have adapted to the larger society. Accordingly, the major themes of American Jewish historiography persist. The history of American Jews is “about” fruitful accommodation and exchange between Jews and a predominantly hospitable society. The image of America that emerges from American Jewish historiography is that of a tolerant, pluralistic, and democratic country, blemished in certain regards and at certain times, but progressively inclusive and egalitarian.

57. See Sorkin’s article, “Is American Jewry Exceptional? Comparing Jewish Emancipation in Europe and America,” in this issue of *American Jewish History*.

An historiography untethered from exceptionalism would enable American Jewish historians to engage more closely the larger U.S. field, which long ago moved beyond the liberal paradigm undergirding exceptionalism. Useful in this regard is the work of political theorist Rogers Smith, who has put forward a “multiple traditions” paradigm as an alternative to the theory of a dominant liberal tradition associated most famously with Louis Hartz. According to Smith, democratic traditions have always vied with “inegalitarian ideologies and practices often resurging even after major enhancements of liberal democracy.” Antiliberal forces should not be regarded as aberrations, but rather constitutive elements of American politics.⁵⁸ If this holds true, then legal equality cannot be considered the departure point from which American Jewish history unfolds in its “adventure in freedom,” but an evolving framework, incomplete and uneven in application, and at times reversible.

Smith’s theory of “multiple traditions” may be one of any number of others that offer an appropriate paradigm for understanding the complexities of Jewish experience in a country that has both welcomed Jews and excluded them. In a country at once democratic, diverse, and relative open, yet persistently stratified along lines of religion, class, gender, and race, Jews have had to negotiate opposing dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. This has resulted in the ambiguous position of an insider/outsider, participants in the mainstream and dwellers on the margins. To overlook such contradictions, or to subsume them under an overall narrative of freedom and success (however that might be measured), is to lose much of what makes American Jewish history fascinating and compelling.

58. Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *American Political Science Review* 87 (Sep. 1993): 549–66. See also Smith’s article, “Understanding the Symbiosis of American Rights and American Racism,” in Hulliung, *The American Liberal Tradition Reconsidered*, 55–89.