

ROUNDTABLE

## Roundtable on Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

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Participants: Hasia R. Diner, Eric L. Goldstein, Jonathan D. Sarna and Beth S. Wenger

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### Introduction

Our moment—in the wake of Charlottesville’s “Unite the Right” Rally, the shootings and stabbings in Pittsburgh, Poway, Monsey, and Jersey City, and other eruptions of violence targeting Jews, of reemerged anti-Jewish dog-whistling from far left to far right, and of fractious debates about anti-Zionism—calls on us to reflect on the long history of anti-Semitism in America. Though recognizing its repugnancy may be a straightforward enough task, interpreting what anti-Semitism says about larger social, political, or psycho-spiritual matters dear to America can be a confounding affair since its motivations, instantiations, and even the stakes in discussing it can be opaque, and as we well know, in more recent years, weaponized. Even what to call the phenomenon (antisemitism, anti-Semitism, Judeophobia, anti-Jewish oppression, anti-Jewish racism, etc.) is a matter of debate, as are definitions of Jews and anti-Semitism in respective discursive realms.<sup>1</sup> It matters whether the law or the public understand “Jews” as an ethnic, racial, religious and/or national origins group. It matters who adopts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism.<sup>2</sup>

At its broadest, anti-Semites represent “the Jews” (or a totemic, individual Jew, a nefarious cabal of Jews, or sometimes the Jewish State) as a force that controls and manipulates the world to the detriment of ordinary, local, real people. Anti-Jewish sentiment from across the political spectrum often includes one element that distinguishes it from other forms of oppression: Jews’ supposed outsized power. This oppression runs on a conspiratorial logic that aims to give it explanatory power to account for others’ suffering. It thrives under conditions of social discontent and instability, conditions that capture our moment.

While the contemporary relevance of the discussion is odiously obvious, the importance of focusing on anti-Semitism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era may be less so. But it is a period that is critical for understanding why and how American anti-Semitism has unfolded the ways it has, even if today also draws from tropes and histories before and after the Gilded Age, and from more than a few non-American locations. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era witnessed the largest demographic shift in Jewish history; some two and a half million Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews arrived in America between 1881 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which effectively halted Jewish immigration using the National Origins quota. Because the period saw a nearly hundred-fold increase in America’s Jewish population from a half-century

earlier, and because these Jews, unlike the coreligionists that preceded them, were poorer, more religiously observant, and Yiddish speaking, Jewishness began to take up far greater space in the broader American cultural imagination as Americans fretted about the urbanization and industrialization that were transforming the nation.

The period has long captured the focus of historians of American Jewry, from the emergence of the professional field in the 1950s until recently. It is well understood as bedrock, and retains its claim of the lion share of undergraduate instruction time. Yet historians of American Jewish life have been turning their research attentions to other times, places, and subjects in more recent decades to flesh out a fuller picture of American Jewish life—to the south and west, to the interwar and postwar periods, and to many subfields, with myriad interesting results. At the same time, U.S. historians of other specializations have focused precious little attention on the Jewish experience in their discussions of American immigration, nativism, religion, and many other matters in which Jewish subjects fit.

So, when the editors of this journal approached me to assemble a forum on anti-Semitism, aside from the nausea of being “relevant” in this particular area, I knew whom to ask for insight. Hasia Diner, Eric Goldstein, Jonathan Sarna, and Beth Wenger are four of the most accomplished and astute historians of American Jewish life, long-time colleagues, able and willing to dive into the material and to challenge one another.

The forum we created follows a Question–Answer–Response format. The questions I pose are about how to understand the meaning of anti-Jewish ideas and actions during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in so far as anti-Semitism was a part of American life and therefore tells us something about the broader American landscape. Each scholar answers two questions directly, and each has a response to two of their colleagues’ answers. We begin by trying to disentangle fiction from fact with respect to the economic realities that might have underpinned social discord in the period (Q1). The discussion then moves into historiography, with a question posed about two landmark essays on anti-Semitism during the Gilded Age, one by Naomi Cohen from forty years ago; and another by John Hingham, twenty-odd years before that (Q2). Questions three through six parse out distinct aspects of anti-Semitism, analyzing race and religion (Q3); gender and rights (Q4); U.S. exceptionalism and comparisons with contemporaneous European anti-Semitism (Q5); and regionalism (Q6). The penultimate question focuses on what we learn about American fears by examining anti-Jewish ideas (Q7), and the forum ends with a discussion about teaching anti-Semitism today (Q8).

All of the contributing scholars to this forum offer genuinely thoughtful and nuanced answers to my questions. Common themes emerge from the answers and responses, as do some clear disagreements. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the commentators debate the nature and consequences of Jews’ status and how to interpret ambiguities of Jewish racial and religious otherness. At stake here is the question of how much this form of oppression—like or unlike other forms of oppression, like racism, classism, and sexism—limited people’s material opportunities. Important questions are raised but remain unresolved here too, as in the wider scholarly literature about anti-Semitism. While Hasia Diner argues for the importance of comparing the consequences that Jews suffered from antisemitic discourse and policy with the impacts of racism on American Blacks, Asians or Native American, Eric Goldstein’s approach seeks to clarify what specific, context-rooted incarnations of anti-Semitism specifically reveal about American anxieties. Where Beth Wenger describes anti-Semitism as an

enduring, structurally embedded phenomenon, Jonathan Sarna sees it as something rather more cyclical; Hasia Diner questions whether anti-Semitism is even a coherent, single, essentially unchanging “thing,” suggesting “it” might rather resist analytic clarity.

The forum does not, ultimately, provide easy answers. But after dissecting key vectors that produce anti-Semitism, and after considering some ways we might make sense of it in the larger historical context of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, I hope and trust that we scholars and students alike might stimulate understanding, and deepen our engagement.

1. **The period in question is often known to the readers of this journal as the “Gilded” Age—an allusion to Mark Twain’s observation about the emergence of American wealth and power, a new glittery-ness that provided a mere thin coating on top of a more complicated, and darker America beneath it. Indeed, it seems to me that the period was an era of great extremes. American Jews during this period could certainly be found on every rung on the socio-economic ladder. (They also spanned a wide politico-economic spectrum, from every manner of communist to titans of capitalism). So, let’s start with some broad strokes. Hasia, what would you say are the essential facts and what are the essential fictions when it comes to understanding antisemitism as an economic force?**

#### **Hasia Diner:**

If fact refers to a carefully assembled and nuanced declaration of what happened and how and fiction instead consists of hyperbolic statements shorn of their deeper context, then much of what has been said, by historians as well as others, about anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age falls into the latter category with relatively little of the former. That we cannot think about anti-Semitism in those years without considering economic matters goes without saying, but we also need to think about those economic forces in a dynamic way and as they intersected with the era’s other major trends.

It seems only fitting to pose some analytic problems about the noun “anti-Semitism” and its adjective, “anti-Semitic.” How best to define them when thinking about that time and place? How can we measure them? Did they exist in isolation from the way our subjects—Americans at the end of the nineteenth century—thought about difference of any kind? Ought we create a spectrum of anti-Semitic intensity and do we need to distinguish between attitudes, words, images, and actions, which marked the Jews and which described them, negatively, in relationship to new economic realities?

My short statement here cannot even begin to dissect these matters, but suffice it to say that the Gilded Age, the years from the end of the Civil War until the launch of the Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century offered many anecdotes, examples, and moments in time when some American, some non-Jew, someplace, in some medium, had something ugly and hateful to say about “the Jews,” linking them to the mass disruptions of the economy that privileged the few and impoverished the majority.

In this era, older religiously based talk aimed at Jews as the bearers of a defective religion, deniers of the truth of Christianity melded effortlessly with the specter of “the Jew” as the beneficiary of the new economic order and indeed, according to some Americans, Jews as its agents. While the association of Jews with money and as wielders of financial power had global roots extending centuries earlier than the

Gilded Age in the United States, it achieved a certain currency in this period, one when Americans, particularly those at the lower end of the economic spectrum, fretted over currency, broadly defined.

Jews as cheap despite having money, as greedy in the face of the suffering of others, as always seeking to wring profit out of any situation, and as among the winners in the emerging economic order resonated here and there among Americans. Such rhetoric manifested in a corpus of images, whether articulated in print, on the stage, or from the pulpit and can be easily cherry-picked from the vast trove of surviving documents. The late historian Leonard Dinnerstein dubbed this period as responsible for “the emergence of an antisemitic society,” the title of a chapter in his 1994 book, *Antisemitism in America* (Oxford). He declared that society was “thoroughly” antisemitic.<sup>3</sup> He proceeded to ferret out the details of the era and the fact of its anti-Semitism and in that he confirmed a widely understood fiction about the Gilded Age. To many historians and commentators before and after him, the Gilded Age gave birth to American anti-Semitism.

Dinnerstein, like others, made much of the era’s economic upheavals that provided unparalleled opportunities for the rich to get richer, doing so with the blessings, overt and covert, of the state. The period witnessed the rapid decline of craft enterprises and family farming. The needs of workers, whether employed by the railroad, the juggernaut of development, but also those laboring in the mines and factories had no place on the agenda of policy makers, whether state or federal. The unbridled freedom enjoyed by the business interests led to two devastating depressions, euphemistically called “panics,” which devastated millions of ordinary people.

That spirit of *laissez-faire*, which might be said to have reached its apex in the Gilded Age, did not extend to the matter of race. Whether thinking of the re-enslavement of the supposedly freed African Americans, the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Dawes Act, which created the reservation system for native peoples, American society, through the deliberate exercise of state power, made clear that color determined nearly everything. That endorsement, underscored by presidents, governors, mayors, legislative and judicial bodies at every level, of a color line that endowed some people, those deemed white with privilege and imposed upon others, the non-white part of the population, with liabilities, gave the Gilded Age its other essential characteristic.

In that context Jews functioned as white people, free to go and come as they pleased. Jews had access to public spaces and the society’s resources. They successfully reached for the bundle of rights that accrued to all those defined by their phenotype as standing on the better side of the color line. Gender made a tremendous difference, but Jewish women received the respect and protection offered to all white women, whether they wanted it or not.

Jews, not all for sure, benefited from the economic growth of the day. Whether as peddlers free to follow trade routes into the hinterlands; as shopkeepers who sold in small towns and in big cities; as wholesalers, brewers, and liquor distributors; and as the owners of garment making operations, churning out clothing in decrepit tenement sweatshops and in the emerging factories by the end of the era, they benefited with no restrictions on them. No laws limited their immigration as Jews, and legislation did not name them as threats to the solidity of the white order.

Their whiteness rendered the rhetoric, regardless of its breadth and its ugliness, unremarkable and of minor consequence. In this age of Social Darwinism, which asserted the obvious truth that all groups or nations, however defined, manifested

recognizable characteristics, mental and moral, the accented greedy Jew with his love of money shared the figurative American stage with the drunken Irishman, the volatile and primitive Italian, the dumb Pole, the equally dumb Swede, and on and on.

But the fact that Jews, like other white people, whether immigrants or not, could claim rights, go and come as they pleased, made rhetoric one thing and policy another. The mass Jewish emigration to America grew out of economic imperatives and for most, it worked. As such, anti-Semitism had little resonance in fact and as fact.

### **RESPONSE by Eric Goldstein:**

Professor Diner and I agree on the importance of economic issues as a factor underlying antisemitism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. As I describe in greater detail in my answer to David's seventh question, Jews, because of social and historical factors that identified them in the popular mind with trade, commerce, and urban life, served more than any other group as a receptacle for the fears and anxieties that white, middle-class Americans harbored regarding the rise of industrial capitalism. (As I also state elsewhere, for the same reason Jews also often served as a symbol of the same group's hope and optimism regarding America's economic and industrial rise.) While antisemitism was certainly influenced by religious motives, fear of foreigners, and other factors, it would be hard to deny the centrality of economic factors in making Jews such an object of public discussion and curiosity during these years.

Where I part ways with Professor Diner's analysis, however, is in how I understand the relationship between discourse—what she calls “rhetoric”—and what one might term structural or institutional antisemitism. In Diner's view, antisemitism of the period amounted to little more than negative stereotypes, but these tropes had little impact on the basic well-being of American Jews, who suffered no serious obstacles to social and economic advancement or barriers to full legal equality. Pointing to the color line as the key factor defining exclusion and marginalization in the United States, Diner argues that the whiteness of Jews “rendered the rhetoric, regardless of its breadth and its ugliness, unremarkable and of minor consequence.”

As I have argued in my own statements in this forum and in more detailed fashion in my book about Jews and whiteness, the discourse regarding Jews that circulated in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was not just a free-floating collection of stereotypes detached from any meaningful social context. To the contrary, it was a by-product of the pressing concerns raised by the massive and often destabilizing transformations experienced by Americans of the period, for which Jews were a convenient foil.<sup>4</sup> Given the real-life social concerns that mobilized antisemitism, anti-Jewish images and “rhetoric” were inevitably accompanied by social and institutional measures against Jews that served to enact society's assumptions and respond in some way to the threat that Jews were thought to pose. Indeed, existing scholarship is rife with examples of real social consequences that Jews of this period faced as a result of the place they held in the American imagination. It is well known, for example, that Jews faced discrimination in obtaining credit and loans; that they were refused employment in certain trades, industries, and professions; that they were prevented—sometimes by written covenants and sometimes by custom—from living in many neighborhoods; that many colleges and universities had anti-Jewish quotas; and that private clubs and resorts, fraternities and sororities, and other gathering places of the social and economic elites were often closed to them.<sup>5</sup> This short list tends

to counter Professor Diner's assertion that Jews "benefited [from American economic opportunity] with no restrictions on them."

To be clear, all this does not diminish the crucial point that Jews benefited in many cases—even as new immigrants—from white privilege, nor does it suggest that antisemitism was as pervasive or debilitating a force in American life as racism against African Americans and other non-white minorities. Not only were attitudes and policies toward Jews much less uniformly negative than those toward people of color, but, over time, Jews did find remarkable acceptance in white society. Indeed, because antisemitism never eclipsed aspects of American civic and economic life that were more auspicious for and welcoming to Jews, it served—in some ways by design—to push them toward a level of social and cultural conformity that eventually helped resolve their uncertain status within white society. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the full incorporation of Jews into white America was a drawn-out, tumultuous process. This was true not only for the Jews who sought entry, but also for the dominant class of white Americans, whose equivocal stance toward Jews reflected an uncertainty about the forces of change they represented, and constituted at least a temporary crisis of confidence in the strength and stability of whiteness itself.

From this perspective, neither the antisemitic rhetoric nor the real social and institutional barriers faced by Jews of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era were "unremarkable" or "minor" phenomena. When carefully examined, they reveal the underlying social and psychological tensions—many of them emanating from economic change—that troubled the clarity and consistency of American measures of difference and belonging for a generation. They also unmask the coercive aspects of American culture that pushed groups like Jews to bend to the cultural expectations of the dominant society, making more explicit the beginnings of the process by which whiteness was ultimately reconstituted and stabilized in the post-World War II period.

2. **In 1957, John Higham offered a landmark assessment about the historiography on antisemitism to date, most of which had been written by non-Jewish scholars. In 1979, some twenty-two years later, Naomi Cohen penned an essay that aimed to take stock of the same phenomenon (antisemitism in the Gilded Age) from the perspective of antisemitism's "victims." Jonathan, in your estimation, what—if any—is of enduring value from these historians' insights about antisemitism? I don't want to put you up to writing a full-blown historiographic analysis, but I would like you to explain how the scholarly discussion about antisemitism in America during this period has unfolded since the last broad, synoptic comment on the phenomenon, now forty-plus years ago. Which direction(s) do you believe the scholarly discussion ought to go from here?**

### Jonathan Sarna:

John Higham's scintillating 1957 essay concerning "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age" advanced scholarship on American antisemitism in numerous ways. First, he demonstrated that antisemitism played a cyclical rather than a constant role in American history; it rose and fell—and so did historians' interest in the phenomenon. Second, he underscored the theme of ambivalence within the study of American antisemitism, observing that "diverse and conflicting attitudes" toward Jews coexisted in the minds of Americans, "many were both pro and anti-Jewish at the same time." Third, he related



antisemitism to social problems, such as mass migration, economic dislocation, and the displacement of elites. Through antisemitism, he argued, society “gave a general problem an ethnic focus.” Fourth, he called for a “consistently comparative approach” to the study of American antisemitism, paying particular attention to the hatred directed toward other American ethnic groups, the experience of Jews in other periods of American history, and the “concurrent fate of Jews in other countries.” He knew from his own earlier research on nativism and xenophobia that Gilded Age antisemitism “formed an integral part of a larger, more complex upswing of anti-foreign feeling.” Fifth, he showed that nationalism fueled antisemitism (it “channeled internal discontents into agitation against foreign influences”), and that antisemitism “reached maximum intensity as an integral component of movements aimed at defending the nation from various perils originating beyond the frontiers.” Sixth, he distinguished between three groups of American antisemites in the Gilded Age: patrician intellectuals, poor urban masses, and agrarian radicals such as the populists. Notwithstanding their class and geographic differences, he argued, all three groups found themselves displaced or exploited by industrialization. Finally, he observed that “recent history” shaped and stimulated the historical study of American antisemitism. Repeatedly, new interest in the history of American antisemitism corresponded with a rise in present-day antisemitism. As the latter receded, scholars dismissed the history of American antisemitism as somehow “less important.”<sup>6</sup>

Writing two decades later, with antisemitism again on the rise, Naomi W. Cohen took issue with some of Higham’s conclusions based on “the Jewish view” of Gilded Age antisemitism—the perspective of the victims. She denied, for example, that antisemitism began in the Gilded Age, demonstrating that manifestations of anti-Jewish hatred could actually be found much earlier—as early, we now know, as the colonial period. Where Higham viewed antisemitism as discontinuous, rising and falling like the national economy, Cohen argued that, from the perspective of Jews, antisemitism was relentless; it never declined. The reason, she explained, lay buried in centuries of Christian supersessionism. Where Higham depicted Christianity as “ambivalent” toward Jews, she portrayed its hostility toward them as “a constant.” Jews of the Gilded Age, she observed, paid scant attention to “socioeconomic analyses of the causes for antisemitism,” as Higham did. Instead, they blamed Christian religious doctrines, ignorance, and bigotry for the hostility they experienced—the same “wickedness” (*rishus*) familiar to them from Europe. Though she conceded that Jews were “hardly the most objective analysts” of the antisemitism they experienced, she insisted that they nevertheless discerned “parameters of the problem” that historians like Higham had overlooked.<sup>7</sup>

Scholarship on Gilded Age antisemitism has today not advanced much beyond the insights of Higham and Cohen. Since the mid-1990s, when antisemitism declined and pundits argued that Jews had become “white folks,” the historical study of American antisemitism has languished. Many looked askance at the claim that Jews could be a “persecuted minority.” How could they be, they insisted, when most Jews were not even “people of color”?<sup>8</sup> In 2000, a scholarly monograph supported this thesis; it bore the arresting title “The Death of American Antisemitism.”<sup>9</sup>

Today, though, American antisemitism is plainly back, symbolized by the atrocities in Pittsburgh and Poway. It comes as no surprise then, just as Higham might have predicted, that interest in the history of American antisemitism is likewise back. Yet when one turns to the extant literature, one stands astonished that for all of its many insights—Higham’s article remains particularly rich and rewarding—the word “race” went

practically unmentioned in this literature. What seem like obvious parallels between the experience of Jews in the Gilded Age and the experience of African Americans eluded earlier scholars completely.

The very word “anti-Semitism,” invented in Germany in the late 1870s and rapidly imported into the United States, drew upon racial theory. Where Jews had previously been reviled on account of their religion (which conversion could fix), now, like blacks, they suffered on account of their race, rendering their blood forever inferior to that of the lofty Anglos, Saxons, and Teutons. The late 1870s, as a result, witnessed new forms of discrimination against Jews—similar in kind, if not in degree, to the Jim Crow legislation that, during those same years, imposed racial segregation against blacks. In 1877, the famed Grand Union hotel in Saratoga, New York, excluded banker Joseph Seligman, friend of President Ulysses S. Grant and one of the country’s most respected Jewish figures. “No Israelites shall be permitted in future to stop at this hotel,” Judge Henry Hilton, the Grand Union’s new owner, announced.<sup>10</sup> Within a few years, “Jews as a class” were declared unwelcome even at New York’s Coney Island, and social discrimination against Jews became commonplace across the country.<sup>11</sup> “The provident hotel-keeper avoids the contact of the Hebrew purse,” an 1881 article entitled “Jewish Ostracism in America” reported. “The little child in school finds no room for the Jew in the game at recess ... In social and professional clubs, the ‘Jew’ is blackballed.”<sup>12</sup>

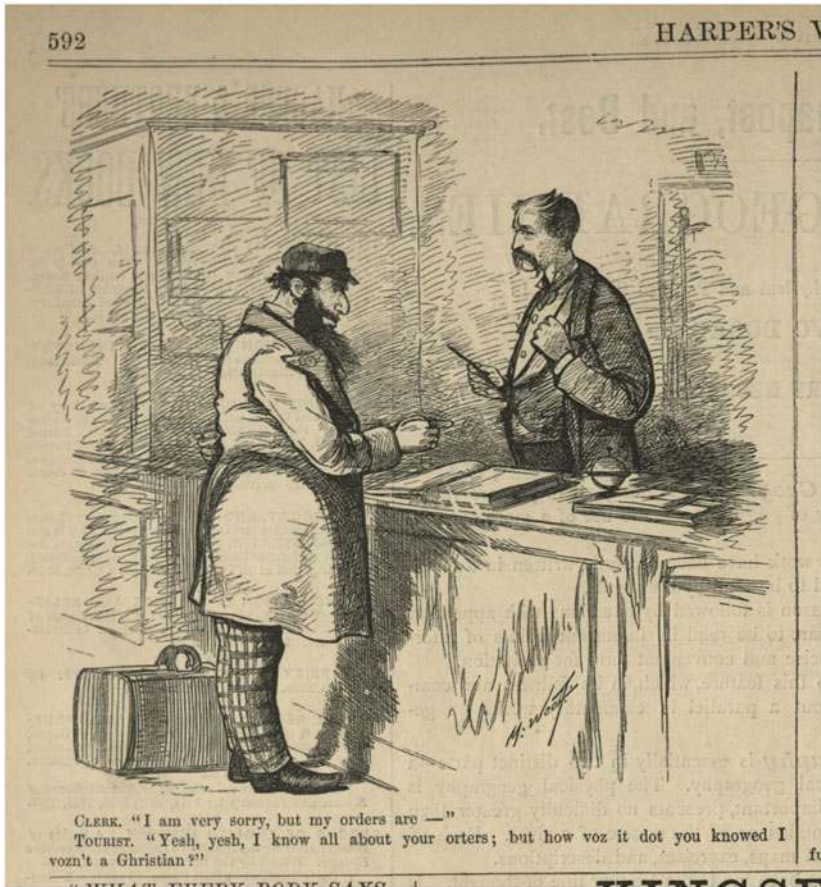
Race, as much or more as other factors, explains why Jews suffered discrimination and widespread civil rights violations during the Gilded Age. Historians like John Higham and Naomi Cohen, writing when they did, before African American history and the story of American racism were fully known, missed the opportunity to analyze antisemitism within this crucial context. As a new generation of historians prepares to re-examine “Antisemitism in the Gilded Age,” one hopes that it will rectify this unfortunate omission.

### RESPONSE by Beth Wenger:

Like John Higham before him, Jonathan aptly observes that scholarly engagement with anti-Semitism has peaked at times of increased anti-Jewish hatred. We live today in one of those historical moments, and contemporary scholars have begun once again to try to make sense of the most recent upsurge in American anti-Semitism. Just a few decades ago, the overwhelming consensus among scholars, most of them supremely confident in the promise of postwar liberalism, concluded that anti-Semitism was quickly fading from the American landscape and would soon exist only at the fringes of respectable society. Jews, they claimed, had taken their place as white ethnics, with all the privileges and power that entailed. But today’s historians acknowledge a far different reality.

Reinterpreting the history of anti-Semitism requires acknowledging the messiness of racial, religious, and ethnic categories, and how they intermingled in prejudicial and exclusionary practices against Jews and others. Jonathan mentions the infamous 1877 incident when Judge Henry Hilton denied Joseph Seligman a room at the Saratoga Grand Union Hotel. One of Seligman’s chief supporters, George William Curtis, editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, had also been an ardent opponent of slavery and a vocal advocate of the nation’s 1875 Civil Rights Act, which briefly guaranteed “full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges,” to all citizens, including African Americans. The Act forbade discrimination in public theaters, transportation, lodging, and other venues before being struck down by the Supreme Court just eight years later.<sup>13</sup> Curtis, like many like him, defended Seligman’s rights to lodging just as





*Harper's Weekly*, July 28, 1877, 592.

he had vehemently condemned the practice of “hotels and restaurants ... turn[ing] respectable guests away because they are of the colored race.”<sup>14</sup> Advocates of equal access, like their detractors, (as well as Jews themselves) often “used the generic terms race and religion inconsistently and imprecisely.”<sup>15</sup> Race as much as religion influenced the shape of anti-Semitism, and often without clear distinction between the two.

The intermingling of religious and racial categories leaps from the page in a very different type of commentary published in *Harper's*. Appearing shortly after the Seligman Affair, the following cartoon offers a caricature of the incident by depicting a Jewish guest being turned away by a hotel clerk who has been given instructions to deny him admission. The dejected Jewish patron, drawn with a long beard, hooked nose, and exaggerated Semitic features, is clearly coded as racially Jewish. His heavily accented English marks him as an immigrant and a foreigner, even as he asks the clerk, “how voz it dot you knowed I vozn't a Ghristian?”<sup>16</sup> In this satiric presentation, the spurned Jewish visitor is all at once a product of his race, religion, and immigrant status—

and all three combine to seal his fate in this as well as in many other expressions of anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

3. Eric, it seems to me that the dominant anxieties about religion in America during this period were about Roman Catholicism and secularization, while concerns about racial difference focused on blacks, Indigenous peoples, and Asian immigrants. Concerns about Jews' religious difference from mainstream, white, Protestants just didn't take up as much public space. Then again, whatever anti-Judaism Jews had to face down or negotiate certainly shaped their own experiences. Were Jews hit by both forms of xenophobia equally, or was there a change during this period? Did anti-Jewish sentiment morph from "religious" to "racial" during the period? Do you think this transformation (or lack thereof) has anything to teach about the dynamics of group animus more broadly in America?

#### Eric Goldstein:

David, your question recognizes correctly that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American Jews sometimes registered as a "race" and sometimes as a "religion." But I think in asking whether Jews were treated more like Catholics or more like peoples of color, and whether this changed over time, you are missing the extent to which race and religion were intertwined categories in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America, not just for Jews but for other groups as well.

In the period under discussion—and I believe this is still often true today—the concept of "race" was not only used to assert physical differences between groups, but also to impute to each of those groups particular mental, moral, ethical, and character traits that were understood as innate and inheritable. Thus, judgments about racial difference were often also judgments about religious and moral differences and vice versa. True, there were theological disputes among white Protestants of various denominations, but these internecine squabbles never undermined the assumption that members of this broader grouping shared a basic set of morals and values, rooted in common ancestry, that distinguished them from racial outsiders. Conversely, although many African Americans were Protestants, and Native Americans and Asian immigrants were frequently the targets of Protestant missionizing, white Protestants continued to see these groups, with exceedingly few exceptions, as possessing a deficient moral and religious nature that could at best be mitigated—not overcome—by conversion, and therefore prevented them from ever being seen as spiritual equals.<sup>17</sup>

Catholics and Jews were never marginalized in American society as significantly or consistently as African Americans and other peoples of color. Still, it would be a mistake to think that white Protestants viewed them solely as religious minorities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the scholarly literature on race has demonstrated over the past few decades, European immigrant groups who differed in background from the majority society were often defined in racial terms. While on occasion they were compared to African Americans, their perceived racial distinctiveness did not mean that they were uniformly seen as non-white. It would be more accurate to say that their perceived differences could not easily be classified within a black-white understanding of race, and that as a result, their relationship to whiteness remained ambiguous. Despite the fact that they held a somewhat different place in the American racial landscape than peoples of color, their perception as racially distinct

meant that, like African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian immigrants, their religious and moral life was seen as inseparable from the larger bundle of racial characteristics thought to characterize these groups.

Irish immigrants, who were perhaps the most demonized of all Catholic groups, serve as a vivid example. As Catholics, the Irish were criticized by native-born white Protestants for their fealty to Rome, which was seen as a threat to the Republican values of the United States. Ostensibly this was a religious issue, but upon further examination, it becomes clear that these charges were simply one example of a broader racial characterization of the Irish as a subservient people, one that also informed images of them as “slavish” workers who threatened the independence of free labor, willing pawns of corrupt machine politicians, and moral weaklings who were unable to resist the temptation of alcohol.<sup>18</sup>

The nature of Judaism was similarly understood as part of a broader racial profile characterizing the Jews. Often called “Hebrews” or “Israelites” in common parlance, Jews—who during this period were usually immigrants from Central or Eastern Europe—were seen as the heirs of a great religious tradition, the modern representatives of their biblical ancestors. They were portrayed as stubbornly devoted to their ancient traditions, practices, and proscriptions; evincing a strong solidarity with their coreligionists; and proudly certain that they were the Chosen People. Yet these same traits were thought to inform Jewish behavior in other, nonreligious spheres. Thus, the stubbornness seen in Jewish religious devotion was deemed consistent with the unbending assertiveness of the Jewish merchant; the perception that Jews held themselves up as religiously chosen dovetailed with the stereotype that they were an arrogant people who prioritized their own group interests over those of the broader society; and the portrait of Jews as insistent on separateness in matters of worship, diet, and ritual practice was of a piece with the accusation of Jewish social “clannishness,” which was often mobilized in questioning Jews’ ability to integrate into American society.<sup>19</sup>

If Jews and Irish held somewhat proximate places in the American landscape during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, there were also differences that tell us something about how the racial construction of European immigrants worked during this period. One difference has to do with timing: In the 1870s and 1880s, the Irish, who had arrived in massive numbers over the previous half-century, were a much more important focus of racialized discourse and imagery in the United States than were Jews, who at that time—when Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe was just beginning—were still a fairly small group made up of Central European immigrants who had already achieved a significant level of acculturation and upward mobility. From the 1890s on, however, the dramatic growth of the Jewish population made Jews much more visible, and therefore more available, as objects of racialization. But this shift was not simply the result of demographic changes. The Irish attracted disproportionate attention in the earlier period because their social and economic profile linked them to issues—the vulnerability of free labor, political corruption—that were of particular concern to the dominant society during those years. But in the post-1890 period, when the dominant society became more concerned about the rise of large urban centers and the impact of industrial capitalism, Jews became one of the most discussed immigrant “racial” groups because their group profile made them a convenient foil for these issues.<sup>20</sup>

Although different immigrant groups experienced varying levels of scrutiny at different times, in the long run, Jews as well as the various Catholic groups did ultimately make a transition—in the opposite direction of the one suggested in the question—from being seen in largely racial terms to being seen principally as denominational

groups. This transition marked their acceptance as a more stable part of white America, and further differentiated their experience from that of African Americans and other peoples of color, who remained racial outsiders. Yet it is important not to overstate how quickly or easily this change occurred. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, the racial understanding of these groups persisted with few challenges, even from the members of the subject groups themselves. I know less about the Irish case, but Jews of the era certainly accepted the racial definition of their group, giving it a more uniformly positive spin than did non-Jewish commentators. A few Jewish leaders, fearful of the dangers of racial marginalization, did argue strenuously that Jews should be defined only as a religious denomination, but given the overwhelming consensus to the contrary, these voices had little impact. The racial definition of European immigrants only intensified during the turbulent interwar years, and did not abate until after World War II, when the social integration of these groups helped shift American definitions of race and whiteness.<sup>21</sup>

### RESPONSE by Hasia Diner:

Eric rightly points to the instability of these categories and to the fact that they did not exist in some pure form in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries in the United States. Race did not just denote body or phenotype and religion functioned as more than a matter of pure denominational or theological thinking. Rather the terms bounced back and forth, melding at times with words like nation, group, culture, and the like. Thinking about Jews, and about the many other outsiders whose mere presence in the United States challenged white, Protestant, native-born ideas about the health and character of the nation, veered sloppily between categories or labels.

We might throw into the analytic stew here the matter of class. That is, in this long era, the poor increasingly came to be viewed as morally decrepit and their poverty a reflection of flawed essential characteristics. In 1874, the beginning of our era here, a prison official in New York State identified the pseudonymous Jukes family, a multigenerational white family that had produced more than its share of criminals and had lived in endless poverty going back to the eighteenth century. Their blood—as the word genes did not yet exist—according to the science of the times carried these defects back into time and would continue to do so into the future. Or, ethnologists, reformers, educators, and kindhearted Protestant clergy subjected poor, white, native-born Protestants to cultural campaigns to change their behaviors and to, in the process, shed their defective religious practices, which included serpent handling, speaking in tongues, forming sects without trained and ordained clergy, and meeting in shabby storefronts and under the flaps of tents. Despite being white, Protestant, and of American origins, their highly emotional, sensual forms of worship, as well as their degenerate sexual practices, caught the attention of those whom the question here labels members of the “dominant” group. Indeed, under the influence of Social Darwinism a vast discourse opened up about the “hillbillies,” sometimes called “mountain people,” those who inhabited a region labeled Appalachia. Particularly with their massive rural-urban, south to north migration during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, these people came to be defined as problems with racialized overtones and their religious practices a reflection of their defective characters. The fact of the poverty, whether in northern cities or in the growing mill towns of the south, only confirmed their flawed essences. As such, discourse about the Jews, their physical characteristics that reflected their moral and mental abilities, and their religion all worked together but fit into a vast cultural discourse.

Yet I think that we cannot overstate the differences between how Jews, even when considered a race in terms of a group of people with distinctive natures fared in American society, and all people defined as non-white. The law mattered and Jews stood on the right side of it. It strikes me as beyond the pale of discussion to compare the slings and arrows Jews, here or there, may have endured in these decades with the sheer barbarity of Americans and the American state visited upon African Americans, as well as those from China and Japan, Mexicans, and the native peoples.

Vis-à-vis Catholics, I think we can say with some certitude that the opening of synagogues, the creation of Jewish religious institutions, and the flourishing of Jewish religious practice sparked nearly no fearful conversations or antagonistic discussions in this period. Even if held up as odd, quaint, old-fashioned or simply exotic, Judaism did not cause distress among American Protestants as a fundamental threat to their idea of the nation.

This surely did not hold for Catholicism, still depicted by many Protestant Americans as a clear and present danger to liberty and republicanism. The state of Oregon in the early twentieth century passed a law that required all children to attend public schools, an effort essentially to put Catholic parochial schools out of business. Although the U.S. Supreme Court in 1925 struck the law down, we are hard-pressed to find any similar state action that aimed at a key part of Jewish communal and religious life. Or, let us also consider Mormonism. Here was a religion that in this period had to give up one of its key practices, polygamy, in order for its adherents living in their safe place, Utah, to literally be admitted to the nation. Jews and Judaism experienced no such assaults and whatever modifications Jews made to their religious practices had little to do with state coercion.

David's question also referred to secularization as something that worried many Americans, and here I think the history of Jews offers an interesting window into the period. The connection between Jews and the concern of secularization goes well beyond thinking about anti-Semitism. The theme of the breakdown of religion, its marginalization, and the increasing number of places and activities in the public arena devoid of religious, that is Protestant, tones, deserves consideration.

This Gilded Age coincided with the rise of Darwinism, perceived by pious Christians as a frontal assault on everything they believed. We might say that the Progressive Era, as a bookend here, can be marked by the Scopes Trial. Many Americans fretted about the creep of secularization and efforts ranging from a proposed constitutional amendment declaring the United States a Christian nation, temperance, Sunday closing laws, and the like arose not out of a fear of Judaism but a fear of the de-Christianization of America. Those who fretted over this considered that those of Christian background had fewer reasons to be and live as actual Christians.

Ironically in this period Jews as individuals entered a number of zones of enterprise; ownership of department stores; the production of popular music; the development of vaudeville; and the growth of the movies, which did exactly that. Shopping for pleasure, the development of amusement parks, of dance halls, and of other places of entertainment, erased religion, at least in the moment. Some advocates of a greater Christian content in American life have been labeled as anti-Semitic in the literature, as they at times blamed Jews for this creation of a religiously blank public sphere. It seems to me that using that language, however, robs the historical narrative of the complexity and nuance it deserved.



4. **Jewish immigrant men arrived in the United States with more rights than they enjoyed in the regimes from which they emigrated. By the end of this period, Jewish women shared most of them. Discourse on Jews and scholarship on anti-Jewish bias in Europe focused, to a large extent, on civil and political rights. Beth, to what extent are “rights” also critical to understanding the American experience? To what extent, in other words, do you think we should be looking at the State as the site of anti-Jewish anxiety or prejudice if we truly want to understand what American antisemitism in the period was, and how it worked/works? Is this one discussion, or would it be better to have two separate conversations here, one about women and one about men?**

### Beth Wenger:

Anti-Semitism has been overdetermined as a concept. It is an umbrella term used to embrace the many distinct and often contradictory ideas that comprise negative portrayals of Jews and myriad anti-Jewish prejudices. In anti-Semitic discourses, Jews emerge as both greedy capitalists and conspiratorial communists; they are depicted simultaneously as clannish and insular while also being identified as dangerous internationalists, always plotting some sort of world domination. These are only a few of the incongruous characterizations of Jews that reside under the thick, nebulous, and indeed, shape-shifting heading of “anti-Semitism.” An additional murkiness surrounds the American encounter with anti-Semitism, not the least because historians have often considered it a comparatively minor force in American society that, with some notable exceptions, existed at the margins of the nation’s culture.

Until recently, most historians have insisted that “America was different” and that American Jews never confronted the virulent antisemitism that gripped parts of Europe—an assertion not without certain merits but also lacking nuance.<sup>22</sup> The classic if somewhat oversimplified argument goes as follows: unlike most (but not all) European nations, the United States never required Jews to be emancipated or to prove their worthiness as citizens, since Jewish men became citizens at the founding of the republic and later, many were instantly emancipated when they immigrated to American shores. The limited barriers to Jewish legal rights and equality fell quickly on a federal level and then gradually but systematically in individual states. America allowed for freedom of religious expression; anti-Semitism never gained mainstream political power, and eruptions of violence remained rare. According to this historiographical narrative, America’s dominant liberal paradigm resulted in less vituperative forms of anti-Semitism that allowed for successful immigrant acculturation and explained the rapid upward mobility of Jews, particularly in post-World War II America—the era when these historical interpretations first emerged.

As scholars have begun to reconsider anti-Semitism, many have pointed to its continuous and pervasive presence in American history while acknowledging its comparative lack of violence.<sup>23</sup> In fact, correctives to the dominant narrative about the sporadic and marginal nature of anti-Semitism emerged more than a generation ago. In the mid-1990s, historian Ira Katznelson acknowledged that while American Jews experienced greater cultural belonging in the United States than they had in most European societies, he insisted that “to be a Jew in America ... meant to be an unusual, and rather vulnerable, kind of American.”<sup>24</sup> At minimum, American anti-Semitism can no longer be explained according to a paradigm that isolates it as peaking at moments of mass migration, national crisis, and social change but otherwise trends steadily



downward over the course of American history, especially since the last half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Oscar Handlin, who otherwise wrote triumphally about the unprecedented Jewish freedom in America and the great success that immigrant Jews had reaped from it, went so far as to admit that the dramatic rise in anti-Semitism during the interwar years, after the era of mass migration had concluded, “revealed the Jews had long been treading in isolation along the edge of a precarious abyss.”<sup>25</sup>

A historical approach that may prove more useful is to highlight the structural forces that have undergirded American anti-Semitism. While rarely codified in law, anti-Semitism has remained institutionally entrenched in American culture. Moreover, American anti-Semitism has not only been interpreted as episodic, but it has also regularly been viewed as attitudinal, social, and psychological. John Higham was hardly alone in classifying outbursts of anti-Semitism as linked to a host of anxieties and crises that plagued Americans in the period between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Thus, deeply held agrarian traditions fed suspicions of Jewish immigrants as urbanites, traders, speculators, and small business owners who appeared as “corrupter[s] of the simple virtues of a republic.” During a national “crisis” such as the Civil War, these apprehensions helped fuel wholesale expulsions of Southern Jews by Union forces accusing them of trading in the black market, profiteering, and undermining the war effort. Likewise, in era of mass migration, Jews were among the “motley array of outsiders” who unsettled “a fearful majority” of both patricians and populists. At the same time, Jews drew particular suspicion not only as non-Christians, but also because of their alleged takeover of certain sectors of the economy. While other hyphenated Americans gradually became accepted as white ethnics, if grudgingly and half-heartedly over time, the specter of Jews as particularly dangerous due to their supposed intent to dominate, exploit, and conspire lingered through the Red Scare, the Great Depression, the McCarthy era, and to the present day. For Higham, the nation’s various anti-Semitic movements grew out of disparate “agonies” that erupted at distinct moments and in select populations within American society. But his pathbreaking work on immigration and anti-Semitism failed to consider the endurance of anti-Semitism beyond the era of mass migration and its fundamental embeddedness in institutions of state and society.<sup>26</sup>

The central tenets of American democracy that ensured liberty to Jews and others (though certainly not all) have always existed alongside tenacious anti-egalitarian and anti-liberal forces that were often deeply rooted in the mechanisms of the state.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, the rise of cities, industrialization, and other social and economic dislocations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stoked the fears of both farmers and patricians. To them, new immigrants flocking to the country possessed inferior and dangerous moral and physical traits that threatened to sabotage the nation and undermine their established place within it. But rather than focus on how newcomers “unsettled” some Americans, attention should be paid to examining the ways that those fears manifested themselves in debates on the floors of Congress, as “evidence” in governmental committees, and ultimately in restrictive legislation. The writings of Burton J. Hendrick, E. A. Ross, Madison Grant, and others have by now become familiar sources for vitriolic claims about how southern and eastern European immigrants were “infecting” American stock. Yet, perhaps more telling is how those works made their way into the infamous Dillingham Commission report on immigration, to party politics, to the stump speeches of political candidates, and finally to immigration policy

itself. E. A. Ross held a distinguished professorship in sociology at the University of Wisconsin and lent an air of respectability and academic authority to racist and anti-immigrant theories. It is no accident that the Dillingham Commission relied on several social scientific “experts” to bolster its conclusions. Thus, racist and anti-Semitic ideologies became entrenched in the highest levels of American educational and political institutions.<sup>28</sup>

Like mechanisms of the state, gender provides a useful lens for examining anti-Semitism by linking it to other social structures. Immigrant Jews were regularly portrayed in both popular and academic literature as deviant in gendered behavior. Jewish men, viewed as weak and effeminate, were also depicted as hypersexual and responsible for masterminding white slavery and prostitution. Jewish women emerged in anti-Semitic writings as vulgar, lascivious, and consumed with sexual and material desires.<sup>29</sup> These often-frantic representations came to the fore not simply because some critics disapproved of the conduct of Jewish men and women but because their alleged defiance of established gendered norms endangered the maintenance of the fundamental social order. What historian George Mosse has observed in the European context remains compelling in understanding early twentieth-century American culture: “Nationalism and respectability assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control.”<sup>30</sup> Though anti-Semitic critiques often targeted aberrant Jewish behaviors, traversing gender norms was not merely about conduct but also signaled a “deviance” that at best underscored Jewish otherness and at worst threatened to undermine the nation’s social hierarchies and power dynamics.

Anti-Semitism—in its vast array of meanings and expressions—has been part of the fabric of America since its founding. Its dangers have not been comparable to those faced by African Americans or other racial groups, and indeed never codified into law with the same rigor. Nevertheless, prejudices against Jews have lingered in notions about Jewish corruption, power, deviance, superstition, and religious otherness. Those fighting anti-Semitism, including Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, have often believed that anti-Semitism could be combated by correcting inaccurate portrayals of Jews and by providing education that might alleviate fears and change attitudes. Yet, anti-Semitism has always existed not only in hearts and minds but also in America’s state, institutional, and social structures.

### RESPONSE by Jonathan Sarna:

Beth Wenger’s powerful essay abets what I have elsewhere described as a “maximalist” interpretation of American antisemitism.<sup>31</sup> Antisemitism, she concludes, “has always existed not only in hearts and minds but also in America’s state, institutional and social structures.” She overtly critiques “minimalists” (like historian Oscar Handlin) who considered antisemitism a late and alien phenomenon, and implicitly critiques those, like John Higham and myself, who have argued for a more cyclical interpretation that shows antisemitism waxing and waning over the course of American history, the peaks and valleys closely linked to social and economic crises. According to her essay, “anti-Semitism has remained institutionally entrenched in American culture.” Embedded as it is “in institutions of state and society,” she finds it unsurprising that it endures to the present day.

The historian Shulamit Volkov, writing about Germany, has wisely warned against theories of antisemitism based on cultural embeddedness. “Though Jews were not

much appreciated at all times,” she acknowledges, “they were actively resented and persecuted only in particular places and at particular times. Beyond acknowledging the persistence of anti-Jewish feelings, it is the historian’s role to explain how and why a certain form of anti-Semitism characterizes certain societies at certain times.”<sup>32</sup>

Volkov’s famous thesis, first set forth in her now classic 1978 article, “Anti-Semitism as a Cultural Code,” led to a Copernican turn in the study of antisemitism that students of American antisemitism would do well to emulate. Antisemitism, she showed, revealed less about Jews than about the culture that stigmatized them. Late nineteenth-century German antisemitism, for example, “served as a code, a signal for a much larger and more important political and cultural phenomenon at that time: that of antimodernism.” More recently, for ideologists of the left, Jews became a symbol of the left: “They stood for its essence and its vices. By attacking them one was finally up in arms against all and every manifestation of Western culture.”<sup>33</sup>

Leo P. Ribuffo’s article on “Henry Ford and The International Jew,” which appeared soon after Volkov’s work, showed how one of America’s foremost antisemites used the term “the international Jew” as an organizing principle and cultural code. The ills Ford ascribed to Jews—unraveling family bonds, new styles in dress and music, changing sexual mores, Hollywood “lasciviousness,” and the “filthy tide” sweeping over the theater—reveal little about actual Jews, but a great deal about Ford himself and America’s troubled culture in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup>

Prof. Wenger’s assertion that “anti-Semitism has always existed not only in hearts and minds but also in America’s state, institutional, and social structures,” undercuts the necessary work of decoding the antisemitic claims of particular times. Our job, it seems to me, is to understand what antisemitism reveals about those key cultural moments. Antisemitism, far from being continuous, has actually been discontinuous in American history. Its peaks as well as its valleys cry out to be studied.

5. **Antisemitic political parties emerged in Germany in the 1870s and 1880s; they did not in the United States around the same time. Yet it seems to me there are some remarkable parallels between Germany and the United States between then and the Great Depression. To what extent do you think leaders weaponized antisemitism, or used it as a tool for political gain (at any level of government)? Is Jewish “race baiting” the right notion to use when thinking about antisemitism during the Gilded Age? And more broadly, do you think it’s essential or essentially misleading to compare antisemitism in the United States and anti-Semitism anywhere else during these decades?**

#### **Hasia Diner:**

Some Americans, non-Jews, involved in the world of politics uttered words that defamed Jews. Whether they ran for office and won, or lost, some uncountable number laced their rhetoric with statements about the undesirability of the Jews, claiming that their race or religion rendered them unfit for American citizenship. Individuals questioned the Jews’ morality, emphasizing their obsession with money, profiteering off the misery of real Americans, or involvement in the shady worlds of crime, liquor distribution, and prostitution. Others claimed that as nonbelievers, Jews and their accursed religion had no place in a Christian nation. As historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we cannot ignore the political figures, national, state and local, who mined a deep vein of anti-Semitism.

But besides the obvious, the issue of anti-Semitism as a force in American political life in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era deserves to be put in an analytic context that does more than pluck from the ample trove of anti-Jewish vocabulary. Rather we might explore beyond the world of words.

Few, indeed none of these ugly words eventuated into policies limiting the Jews' access to the entitlements of citizenship. Not only did this never happen, but congresses, legislatures, and city councils did not debate doing so. Courts did not ponder the legal status of the Jews or explore the possibility that they were not entitled to constitutional protections. Jews, no place and at no time in these years, faced the prospect that the benefits of whiteness that accrued to them might be taken away. Jewish men voted, served on juries, held office, turned to judicial bodies for redress of grievances as individuals, and enlisted the sympathetic ears of public officials when they believed that, as Jews, they and their people needed some state intervention. These simple realities reveal the degree to which anti-Semitism did not poison the political air for Jews. Words hurt but actions would have harmed.

That no anti-Semitic party formed in these years, or ever, bears discussion. So too the truth that no party platform made Jews the focus of political planning. Rather, due to the hardiness of the two-party system, which essentially doomed any third party to failure, both the Republicans and Democrats courted the Jews, whether running presidential candidates on the national level or if seeking office on the state and local levels. Politicians' overtures to Jewish men may have been symbolic acts, but symbols mattered and when it came to counting the ballots, Jews had what politicians, reformers or machine hacks, crusaders for good-government or the denizen of the smoky backrooms where the local "old boys" ran the organizations, wanted. Jewish men, white adults with votes, could go to the ballot box come election day. Neither party had a reason to offend the Jews among their constituents. Both went out of their way to woo them, put them on their tickets, and do just enough of what it took to get their support.

Jews benefited politically, and anti-Semitism withered as a potential political cause, because of the essentially issueless nature of this two-party politics. The Gilded Age can rightly be said to have begun with, in Rayford Logan's apt phrasing, "the betrayal of the Negro," when the Republican Party abandoned its founding ideology, which sought some kind of racial justice at the end of Reconstruction. It joined the Democratic Party in lurching from election to election with one paramount goal: winning the largest number of votes and holding power as long as possible. Neither went into elections in these decades with a firmly stated ideological agenda that could alienate too many possible voters. Their parties' resemblance to each other wiped out potential rhetoric about Jews as a problem and obviated anti-Semitism as a campaign tool.

Jews, like other interest groups, based around class, ethnic, occupational, neighborhood, and other concerns, had their political issues. Those who ran for and held office consistently balanced the concerns of their many constituencies against each other, hoping to hold on to the loyalty of the largest number and to alienate the fewest. The desiderata of the Jews functioned politically alongside those of everyone else.

When governmental bodies contemplated actions that affected Jews negatively, they did so not because of anti-Semitism. For example, many cities, counties, and states, eager to regulate various aspects of trade passed laws requiring peddlers to purchase licenses to sell from packs on their backs or from horse-drawn wagons. Many Jews made a living this way as did many other people, non-Jews. Legislators argued that peddlers used public thoroughfares and as such in lieu of the property taxes paid by the

owners of brick-and-mortar stores, the itinerant merchants should contribute to the municipal or state coffers by license fees. Sedentary merchants, including Jews, resented peddlers who sold at lower cost. These merchants flexed their political clout to persuade lawmakers to up the cost of the licenses to protect their own economic position. Such action, while annoying to Jewish peddlers, hardly rises to the standard of anti-Semitism as a political force.

Even when thinking about the powerful national issue of immigration restriction, one that agitated the American political scene throughout these decades, the Jews and anti-Semitism did not impel the march toward restriction. The era's immigration, even just the European, encompassed too many people, representing too many national groups or races—whatever the word of choice—speaking too many languages, to make Jews, who numbered about three million at the most, out of about forty million, to have loomed largest in the minds of the advocates for ending unlimited immigration. The American Protestant majority in the 1870s found the mass influx of Catholics who swelled the ranks of the newcomers much more disturbing than the arrival of the Jews and that shaped the restrictionist impulse. If any group of immigrants symbolized to those in Congress the threat to America's character, Italians deserve that dubious distinction.

Additionally, the 1920s quota system did not target Jews. Jews did not stand out as more restricted than others, and Southern Europe, from which hardly any Jews came, did not do any better in the calculus of the National Origins Act than did Eastern Europe, the Jewish heartland. Likewise, Christians from Poland and Romania fared no better than Jews from those same lands. That the Jews who could not immigrate easily suffered a horrendous fate two decades later cannot however allow us to analyze the long and torturous road to racialized restriction as a Jewish story or as one in which anti-Semitism drove the politics. The search for anti-Semitism as a formative strain in Gilded Age and Progressive Era politics must come up close to empty.

### **RESPONSE by Beth Wenger:**

False equivalencies have often hindered the study of American anti-Semitism, and Hasia rightly calls out the dangers of such claims. There is no historical argument that can legitimately equate the experiences of Jews with those African Americans or, for that matter, with many other minority groups in the United States. The nation never excluded Jews from citizenship and indeed during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, Jews had full access to voting rights and could freely seek political office. Because they represented such a small percentage of the population, Jews rarely appeared as the principle targets of racist or anti-immigration campaigns.

Nevertheless, anti-Semitism cannot be dismissed as merely a matter of words. From portrayals of Jews as weak, deficient, and deviant to depictions of them as shrewd, cunning, and determined to undermine and ultimately control all aspects of American life, anti-Semitism fed into the very streams of American thought that determined who was and who was not legitimately an American. Indeed, these anxieties shaped both legal and social policy, strengthening campaigns for anti-immigration legislation and cultivating fears about “outsiders” who allegedly threatened to invade and overtake the young American nation. Anti-Semitic ideas may not have been at the forefront of these ideological and political crusades, but they were both fruitful sources for such movements and emerged from the same wellspring that stoked fears about all sorts of “others.”

David's question centers on the measures used to analyze the meanings and structures of American anti-Semitism. If constitutional rights and legal barriers represent the

sole criteria for assessing its impact, then perhaps the case could be made that anti-Semitism might best be considered a matter of personal and social animus expressed in the vocabulary of slurs, in private exclusionary acts, and in negative attitudes about religious otherness. This logic still requires grappling with the legal impediments that barred Jews from equal access to employment, housing, lodging, and more, but in the catalogue of America's wrongs, these forms of exclusion hardly compare to the entrenched and far more insidious mechanisms of disenfranchisement and structural oppression that faced so many minority groups in the United States. No Jim Crow laws or Chinese Exclusion Act ever touched the lives of America's Jews, but although anti-Semitism never became codified in specific law and policy, it was nurtured, sanctioned, and perpetuated through the same forces that motivated such measures.

Anti-Semitism took root in the festering seedbed that fostered strands of xenophobia and racism that have always existed in the not-so-hidden underbelly of American liberalism. For those who defined the culture of the United States as fundamentally white and Protestant, and who viewed cities and those who inhabited them as corrupting the essence of the nation, Jews represented a signal of America's downfall. Anti-Semitism, like other forms of prejudice, fed political movements that appealed to the reservoir of anxiety about immigrants, people of color, and non-Christians "invading" American shores. While Jews remained a tiny proportion of the immigrant population, they emerged as convenient symbols of racial and religious otherness. The rhetoric and symbolism that stoked anti-Jewish fears, though not always foregrounded, were easily mobilized to justify restrictive immigration policies and political campaigns. The vocabulary and images were powerful but so too were the political consequences. Anti-Semitism never emerged as the single or even the determinative factor that shaped the nation's exclusionary practices. Still, it borrowed from and contributed to both the language and the mechanisms of structural discrimination, for Jews as well as for others.

Understanding anti-Semitism is thus not about determining a calculus of comparative discrimination nor can it be dismissed as wholly attitudinal. Anti-Semitism requires a consideration of more than words alone, for it is bound up with broader frameworks of legal and extralegal exclusion and inequity that have long been a part of American political ideology.

6. **Jews moved around the country an awful lot during this period. They lived and worked in the exploding industrial cities, in heartland towns, plantations, rural zones, and boomtowns. Indeed, America's regions during the Gilded Age were perhaps at their most varied and mutually distinct. To what extent does a regional analysis of antisemitism during this period yield essential insight into its character, nature, or our understanding of it?**

### Jonathan Sarna:

Historians of American antisemitism have paid scant attention to geography and mobility. We know all too few specifics about where antisemitism in the Gilded Age erupted, where it slumbered, and why. Preliminary analysis nevertheless suggests that geography and mobility have played a smaller role in shaping American antisemitism than other factors.

John Higham argued that deprivation, rather than geography, best explained the three core antisemitic groups in the late nineteenth century. Agrarian rebels caught up in the populist movement, patrician intellectuals in the East, and the urban poor of bustling cities felt victimized by rapid industrialization—"the poor because it



exploited them, the patricians because it displaced them.” All three groups vented their anger at the Jews. “Status loss” theories, once dominant in the study of antisemitism, subsequently fell out of favor, but Higham’s typology remains powerful. He showed that Gilded Age antisemites, be they Kansas farmers, Cambridge intellectuals, or Manhattan day laborers, and notwithstanding their manifest differences, all shared one great fantasy in common: they believed that Jews lay at the root of their problems.<sup>35</sup>

Southerners have often maintained that their region of the United States exhibited less antisemitism than others. North Carolina Governor Zebulon B. Vance, after all, proudly assumed the mantle of a noted philo-Semite and his popular (and moneymaking) Gilded Age address concerning “The Scattered Nation” credited Jews with “all that is excellent on earth or in heaven.”<sup>36</sup> Overall, historian Howard N. Rabinowitz, in his 1988 evaluation of Southern antisemitism, concluded that “the South and Southerners can justifiably claim to have exhibited less anti-Semitism and even nativism than certainly the East and Midwest.”<sup>37</sup> Yet Andrew Hieke, in his more recent study of Jewish Identity in the Reconstruction South, has cast doubt on such claims. “Public philo-Semitism,” he argues, “was foremost a ‘courting’ of a somewhat white minority in the struggle for southern white self-determination.” He detects a great deal of covert antisemitism in the Gilded Age South, and portrays Southern Jews as “integrated outsiders”: suspected because they were Jews, accepted because they were manifestly not black. Antisemitism in the Gilded Age South differed from its northern counterpart, according to Hieke, but it most certainly existed.<sup>38</sup>

Historians of the American West likewise contend that their region exhibited less antisemitism than its neighbors. Historian John Livingston cited several historians as maintaining “that anti-Semitism was less prevalent in the West than it was elsewhere in the country, particularly in the Northeast.” He pointed to the welcoming hand extended to Jewish pioneer merchants, the unusually large number of Jews who won election to public office, and the acceptance of Jews into elite circles in San Francisco even as they faced exclusion from such circles in New York.<sup>39</sup> Upon closer inspection by the historian of Jewish San Francisco, Fred Rosenbaum, a good deal of “lurking prejudice” nevertheless revealed itself: discrimination, slurs, libels, theological attacks, and the like. Rosenbaum persuasively showed, however, that San Francisco Jews boldly defended themselves against antisemitic attacks that took place during the Gilded Age. “They had been among the city’s founders during the Gold Rush,” he concluded, “and they were not about to be pushed aside a generation later.”<sup>40</sup>

Jews’ status as founders, indeed, may ultimately have been a far more important factor in determining the extent of antisemitism than the particular region where they settled. Comparative studies inspired by the work of John Higham reveal that “the degree to which Jews were involved in the early growth of a city and had achieved a notable and respected place in public and private life before the era of mass immigration directly influenced how later generations of Jews were received.”<sup>41</sup> Jews in Charleston, Cincinnati, and San Francisco, for example, enjoyed “founder” status. While no prophylactic, this significantly helped to mitigate local antisemitism. Jews in Boston, Minneapolis, and San Diego, by contrast, enjoyed no similar advantage. They arrived in numbers long after the founding of their communities, and as perceived “interlopers” the antisemitism they faced was far worse.<sup>42</sup>

Still, as Shari Rabin has recently reminded us, mobility mattered.<sup>43</sup> Faced with antisemitism, Jews felt free to leave wherever they had settled and remove to locations where they expected to receive warmer welcomes. The merchant Lazarus Straus, for example, closed up shop and left Talbotton, Georgia, in 1862 after a local grand jury charged Jews with

extortion and speculation. He took up residence and opened a new store thirty-seven miles away in Columbus, Georgia.<sup>44</sup> In that case, as in many others, it is hard to disentangle opportunistic motivations from the desire to escape local bigotry. Nevertheless, the fact that Jews could freely move, as they could not have done in much of Europe, meant that antisemitism in America carried consequences. During the Gilded Age (and later), American Jews repeatedly left communities where they felt threatened, and concentrated in places where they felt safer. So more than geography and mobility shaped American antisemitism, antisemitism shaped the geography and mobility of American Jewry.

### RESPONSE by Hasia Diner:

The existing scholarship culled here by Jonathan provides much information about the geographic ubiquity of anti-Jewish words and deeds. He rightly points to incidents that historians have uncovered about this place or that where Jews endured some degree of, in recent parlance, othering. His answer, drawn from the existing literature that studied so many different places in the United States during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, when cited as he does, demotes region or location as the central analytic category that should concern us. His answer by necessity had to be brief but if allotted more words, he could handily have offered many examples, drawn from studies of basically all places.

As such Jonathan's answer undermines David's question. Region, in fact, did not seem to matter much and every place, at some moment in time over the course of these decades, witnessed acts that seemed to target Jews, negatively, or where individuals on their own or representing organizations or institutions or claiming to do so, asserted that Jews differed from everyone else and that they threatened the welfare of the community. Since historians can only work with surviving documents, we may reasonably assume that the incidence of anti-Jewish talk and action actuality surpassed that about which we already know. And we know region mattered little. In fact, every book written about Jewish life in that period, city by city, region by region, provides some nuggets of anti-Semitic discourse and deeds.

I would like to offer a corrective to the question by posing some additional ones. With regard to region, what we really need to get a handle on are the historic contexts of these words and acts, wherever they took place, so we might indeed wonder: Did the perpetrators of thuggish street violence against Jews in a particular region, often gangs of young men, for example, beat up or harass only Jews or did they target anyone they thought might be vulnerable or carrying cash? Were they looking for Jews or did they want to keep their street corners and playgrounds for themselves, regardless of who happened to transgress what the urban sociologist Gerald Suttles called *The Social Order of the Slums* (1968)? Did these youthful hooligans continue to prey on Jews or did they grow up to be sober, peaceful adults? How long did the street violence against Jews persist? Or, did the person who uttered the anti-Semitic words go on and do anything about it, perhaps drive the Jews out of town at gunpoint? Did she or he actually know what "Jew" meant and from where did they acquire their knowledge? Did the utterances of hateful words take place once in their life, at a heated moment in time, or did they persist for years and decades?

But I do not want to completely throw out the idea of region. For a further and richer stage of analysis about anti-Semitism and place, we need to see if the ebbs and flows of anti-Semitism might correlate with upswings or downswings of the local economies or with the influx of immigrants, not necessarily Jews, from some new place. It would be ideal to align anti-Semitic moments with the eruption of words and acts aimed at other

groups of non-native born, non-white, non-Protestant Americans. Did they happen in tandem with each other or did time and intra-regional space separate them? How much do we need to know about who lived in these places? Would we not learn even more about anti-Semitism and the status of Jews in these specific settings if we knew, for example, that the white Protestant population itself had just moved there from elsewhere? Would it matter from where had they migrated? After all, in a nation like the United States characterized by constant and intense physical mobility, and not just of the Jews, women and men no doubt brought ideas about all sorts of matters with them as they pursued new opportunities in new places. Finally, if anti-Semitism refers to statements purporting that Jews somehow differed from other Americans, mentally and morally, will the map chart also those instances when in those very communities' invocations of Jewish difference claimed the Jews to be smarter, more sober, more law abiding, and more adept at business than others?

Historians of place in the United States focus less on the big regions—North, South, West, Midwest—but on the many places within them: borderlands, hinterlands, cities, the edges of cities, commercial agricultural zones, places of small hardscrabble farming, logging, mining, and mill towns. Such categories render regions less meaningful than the single regions that ultimately appear flat and defy analysis.

So too in a land where Americans, not just Jews, shifted residence rapidly and constantly, we should perhaps not try to determine if north or south, east or west or mid-west manifested the most frequent and worst kind of anti-Semitism. By the latter part of the Progressive Era, for example, many white southerners had moved to Southern California, while many from the mountainous areas of Kentucky and West Virginia flocked to Detroit, Cincinnati, and Chicago. Which region should we invoke in terms of thinking about them and relationships with Jews?

Coming up with a real definition of the concept of anti-Semitism confounds thinking about region, as well as class, race, religion, and gender. This forum question, as so many others, reveals that the term anti-Semitism can stand for whatever one wants. As an indeterminate category, we might want to consider the reasons scholars, like those cited in Jonathan's answer, have used it. What work does, and did, the term do? Thinking about the term itself may be more interesting than interpreting instantiations of anti-Jewish behavior when thinking about the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, and indeed any other period in American history.

**7. What specific American fears did this period's antisemitism reveal? Does attention to Jews and suspicion/hatred toward them help us anything we couldn't learn about America by looking at other "others"?**

**Eric Goldstein:**

During the era under discussion, and particularly after 1890, Jews became a focus for discussion and debate among members of America's dominant society to an extent unparalleled in any previous era of U.S. history. As I mentioned above in my remarks on question 3, this increased attention was in part due to the expanding size of the Jewish population, which grew from about two hundred thousand in 1870 to over three million in 1920, but it also stemmed from the unique symbolic role that members of the dominant society began to assign to Jews at this time, one that no other outsider group was as well positioned to play. Because of their particular history and socio-economic profile, Jews came to be associated in the minds of Americans with the massive

changes—industrialization, urbanization, and commercialization—that were then reshaping their society.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike other European immigrant groups, who were mainly peasants and agricultural workers in their homelands, Jews had long been concentrated in commerce, trade, and skilled crafts, and therefore tended to live in towns and cities rather than on farms. In the rapidly urbanizing United States, these occupational and residential patterns became even more pronounced, with Jewish newcomers seeking opportunities as skilled workers and entrepreneurs, and settling disproportionately in the largest cities. Although Jews made up only about 3 percent of the U.S. population at the end of this period, by 1915 they constituted a quarter of the population of New York City. No other group seemed to exemplify to the same extent the way of life that was increasingly being fostered by America's modernizing trends. As a result, the image of "the Jew"—usually expressed in racial terms—became an attractive foil for Americans as they struggled with the difficult challenges and pressing questions raised by modernity.

With this background in mind, it is easy to see how the association between Jews and modernity provided a framework for antisemitism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially among those who were most disaffected in a changing America. A prime example is the case of Leo Frank, the Atlanta factory manager accused of the murder of Mary Phagan in 1913 and lynched two years later, who served as a lightning rod for fears about the destabilizing impact of industrial capitalism in the South. Similarly, when opinion makers demonized Jews in the press or in popular culture as arsonists, economic exploiters, traffickers of prostitutes, and slum dwellers, they were projecting onto them the concerns that many Americans had about the failings of their own society under the impact of the emerging urban-industrial order. Even those who increasingly sought to keep Jews out of fashionable clubs and private universities were using antisemitism to channel broader fears about shifting class boundaries and the threat posed to traditional measures of status and authority in a market-oriented culture.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that antisemitism was the only by-product of the association of "the Jew" with modernity in the popular mind. While Americans of the period did struggle with many of the disruptive social transformations that accompanied the rise of a modern economy and culture, they were nonetheless able to retain much optimism about these changes in the years before World War I. Compared to some European countries where the rise of industrial capitalism caused much greater tension and fear, the United States weathered this transition successfully, and Americans—despite their persistent fears—generally perceived themselves more as its beneficiaries than its victims. As a result, the racial discourse that linked "the Jew" with modernity produced at least as many positive assessments of Jewish character as negative ones. For example, Jews were often cast as exemplars of progressive business methods, a group that was unswerving in its strides toward self-improvement, and one that had been able to preserve its devotion to family and community amidst the pressures and temptations of modern life. In short, the racial image of the Jew in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was shifting and uncertain, just like the ambivalent feelings about modernity that it reflected.

If the discourse about "the Jew" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides unusual insight into Americans' complex feelings about modernity, it also reflects one other key aspect of the period's culture: the insufficiency of the black-white conception of race for answering the full range of identity concerns of the dominant society. Traditionally, white Americans relied on the notion of a binary racial

divide based on color for bolstering a sense of themselves as strong and superior and displacing fears and concerns about their own society. They certainly turned to this formula during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era as well, as is evidenced by the massive complex of Jim Crow laws that was erected in the South, as well as the many, less formal ways in which racial segregation was increasingly enforced in the north. These efforts, and the vision of a clear racial hierarchy based on color, which they asserted, were part of a larger attempt to order and control a society in the throes of the destabilizing changes we have discussed. Yet, as the persistence of the ambivalent racial image of “the Jew” suggests, there remained a degree of doubt and uncertainty about these challenges that could not be effectively quelled or obscured by viewing them through a black and white lens. Native-born whites did not cease in trying to resolve the uncertainty reflected in the racial image of “the Jew,” as is evidenced by the attempts of many commentators to compare Jews to and group them with African Americans, or—even more common—the opposite: to predict that they would quickly assimilate and become unproblematic whites. Ultimately, however, neither of these strategies was entirely successful in subverting the troubling ambivalence that the racial image of “the Jew” represented. Indeed, widespread puzzling over the Jew’s ambiguous status in American life only intensified in the two decades following the period under discussion.

Jews were certainly not unique as a group that disturbed or eluded the black-white system of racial classification by serving as a foil for concerns of the dominant white society that a binary understanding of race could not fully address. The Irish, Italians, and many other immigrant groups could be (and have been) the focus of similar stories in various eras of U.S. history. Still, because of the way in which Jews’ social and historical profile positioned them so conveniently to absorb the ambivalence of the dominant society regarding the particular challenges it faced during these years, no other group of the period reflects to quite the same extent both the obstacles white Americans faced in maintaining the stability of the black-white system of race and the underlying reasons why they were so determined to do so.

### **RESPONSE by Jonathan Sarna:**

Eric Goldstein’s understands that Jews came to symbolize for many Americans “the massive changes ... that were then reshaping their society.” As in Germany, so in America, the Jew became (to borrow Shulamit Volkov’s pregnant phrase) a “cultural code.”<sup>46</sup> Antisemitism reveals more about the fears of the times and the antimodernist currents that coursed through American life than it does about Jews.<sup>47</sup>

Goldstein also understands that the ambivalence that for so long characterized American attitudes toward the Jews continued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Antisemitism blended with philosemitism; negative stereotypes with positive ones.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, Goldstein understands that the simplistic “black-white” binary that has come to characterize Americans’ understanding of their own racial past is utterly insufficient. Throughout American history, the status of the Jew has been ambiguous, neither fully white nor black. That explains why, notwithstanding the color of their skin, Jews experienced some of the same kinds of restrictions, albeit to a much smaller degree, that African Americans did: educational quotas, restrictive covenants, occupational discrimination, and physical attacks.<sup>49</sup>

Goldstein properly stresses “the association between Jews and modernity” as the prime source of the era’s antisemitism. But religious change and urbanization likewise stoked fears. Immigrating Jews and Catholics transformed the religious

character of the United States. They introduced strange religious practices and new forms of worship into the country, and challenged Protestant hegemony. In time they remade what had once been an overwhelmingly Protestant country into one that Will Herberg would describe in 1955 as a “triple melting pot” of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.<sup>50</sup>

Jews and other new immigrants also changed America into a primarily urban nation. According to the U.S. Census, only about a quarter of all Americans lived in urban settings in 1870; most remained rural. Nineteenth-century American culture celebrated small towns and frontier life; it viewed bustling cities with foreboding. Yet by 1920, more than half of all Americans lived in cities and so did some three-quarters of all American Jews.<sup>51</sup> Fear of cities and fear of Jews coalesced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Populist literature frequently linked the two fears, and so did those who, in an effort to blunt antisemitic stereotypes, labored valiantly (if naively) to transform immigrant Jews into productive rural farmers.

The key point that Goldstein recognizes is that Jews, arriving in great numbers during this period, both changed America and served as exemplars of the way of life that was increasingly being fostered by the Second Industrial Revolution. His essay demonstrates how antisemitism, properly studied, sheds light on a fundamental question of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. history: how Americans “struggled with the difficult challenges and pressing questions raised by modernity.”

8. **Given the current historical moment we’re living in—with the increase of Judeophobia, and some portion of antisemitic anti-Zionism—have you changed any of the means, methods, or messages you use in your undergraduate teaching about the history of antisemitism? Of what do you think teachers who touch on the history of antisemitism in America should be mindful?**

### Beth Wenger:

Historian Leonard Dinnerstein concluded his 1994 book *Antisemitism in America*—the first comprehensive scholarly monograph on the subject at the time—with the hopeful assessment that “Today antisemitism in the United States is neither virulent nor growing. It is not a powerful social or political force.” He further predicted that there was “no reason to suspect that antisemitism will not continue to decline in the United States even though there will always be sporadic outbursts and temporary flareups.”<sup>52</sup> At the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century and particularly amid the daily barrages of the Trump era, such prognostications seem not only misguided but naïve. Yet, to be fair, Dinnerstein joined a chorus of historians and communal leaders who shared such assessments twenty-five years ago. With near unanimity, scholars concurred that despite a few rare exceptions, anti-Semitism in America had been on the wane since the post-World War II era and that trend would likely continue in the foreseeable future.

Today, students in our classrooms demand that we grapple with contemporary expressions of anti-Semitism because the rhetoric swirls around them on a daily basis, and they are looking to make sense of it. In the last few years, my approach has been to share with my students the ways that historians, including myself, are struggling with how to interpret (and reinterpret) anti-Semitism in an American context. I try to give them a sense of the existing historiography and to interpret present-day anti-Semitism in broader national and international contexts as well as in the longue



*durée* of Jewish history. The goal—and it is not easy to achieve—is to create a nuanced discussion that suggests that anti-Semitism has been underestimated as a historical force in American history while not creating the false impression that it is somehow a transcendent power in contemporary life.

I have alluded earlier in this forum to the dominant postwar historiography that emphasized the comparative weakness and ongoing deterioration of American anti-Semitism. Citing many polls that revealed a steady decline in anti-Jewish sentiment after World War II, a host of experts pronounced the disappearing trend of anti-Semitism in America. Ben Halpern's field-defining proclamation in the mid-1950s that "America is Different" continued to David Gerber's confident declaration in the mid-1980s that in the United States, "[i]deological anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic mass politics have become marginal to the extent that no respectable public figure seems willing to use the old canards as a means of organizing people."<sup>53</sup> Our students naturally balk at such assertions, since they witness these "old canards" being employed on a regular basis. It is for us to explain that these distinguished scholars, like all of us, reflected their own place and time; they were part of a generation that believed wholeheartedly in the linear progress of the American liberal state, and their interpretations of anti-Semitism's inevitable decline grew out of that unshakable faith. In hindsight, what they viewed as mere historical blips—the anti-Communist backlash of the McCarthy era, the bombings of synagogues during the civil rights movement, and the anti-Semitism that accompanied some protests of Israeli policies—turned out to be more than brief aberrations in an otherwise constantly evolving pluralistic society.

The last few years have provided compelling evidence that the tropes of anti-Semitism have an enduring quality capable of being mobilized beyond a political fringe of "deplorables." The recent upsurge in anti-Semitism has taken place amid unprecedented levels of Jewish integration, educational attainment, and economic mobility. This belies the simplistic notion that anti-Semitism would steadily disintegrate once Jews became fully assimilated as one of the nation's "white ethnics." Contemporary anti-Semitism plays precisely on fears of unbridled Jewish ascendancy. These are old motifs that have a long history in modern European and American Jewish history, with Jews supposedly acting as the masterminds of capitalistic, socialist, Bolshevik, and all sorts of forces of world domination. In earlier periods of Jewish history, in both the Europe and United States, notions of Jewish takeover existed alongside perceptions of innate Jewish inferiority, but in recent years, anti-Semitic discourses have adhered far more closely to the language of Jewish power. During the presidential campaign, Donald Trump accused the Clinton campaign of corruption by tweeting an image of Hillary Clinton surrounded by cash and a six-pointed star (which Trump later insisted was merely a sheriff's star).<sup>54</sup> In a far more disturbing example, white supremacists marching at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville chanted "Jews will not replace us," in a frightening attempt to call out Jewish control of the nation's politics and culture.<sup>55</sup>

Anti-Semitism today is, of course, about Jews, but is also about more than Jews alone. Hatred of Jews must be placed in the context of the resurgence of populist, racist, and anti-immigrant sentiment in the early twenty-first century. These ideas, too, have long histories in American culture, and anti-Semitism has almost always been bound together with other xenophobic and white, Christian supremacist ideologies. When our students raise the disturbing example of the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, it is our obligation to remind them that the gunman directly referenced

his hatred for HIAS—the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society founded in 1881 to help East European Jews coming to the United States. HIAS continues to resettle the most vulnerable refugees of all faiths and ethnicities from all over the world. Just hours before the attack, the assailant posted on social media that “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people.”<sup>56</sup> The victims in Pittsburgh were murdered not only as worshippers but as leftists, activists, liberals, and especially as advocates of immigrants and refugees. The shooter, like many on the extreme right, had rendered Jews together with all those who advance the cause of migrants as potential terrorists, bent on slaughtering “his” American people.

Finally, we must teach our students to consider American expressions of anti-Semitism within a global context. By this, I mean not only that anti-Semitism in the United States makes sense only in the larger framework of the rise of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel backlash around the world, but also that it is deeply connected to fears about globalism more broadly. Fierce opposition to immigrants and conspiratorial notions about Jews exist hand in hand with ideologies that reject everything from free trade to multilateral agreements to liberal immigration policies—all in the interest of national sovereignty. Anti-globalism does not cause anti-Semitism but the two remain deeply intertwined.

While much angst has rightfully been directed toward Donald Trump in these last few years, he is perhaps as much a symptom as the cause of these complex social, political, and cultural forces that dominate contemporary movements and discourses. For the next several years, students will undoubtedly arrive in our classrooms thinking about one-word phrases—Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and unfortunately, whatever tragedy might come next. We should try to respond with more than the one-word refrain of “Trump.” As historians, we are, after all, in the nuance business.

### RESPONSE by Eric Goldstein:

I am in resounding agreement with Professor Wenger’s call for a more nuanced approach to the teaching of antisemitism, one that takes it seriously as a factor in American history and in contemporary life, without overstating its role as a “transcendent power.” Wenger frames her remarks around the need to revise a historiography that naively predicted the decline and disappearance of antisemitism in the post–World War II era.

Although I share this goal, I also want to point to a very different conception of anti-Semitism that has recently gained influence in the United States, one that sees anti-Jewish hatred as both eternal and unique. In current popular and journalistic venues, as well in some scholarly treatments, it is not unusual to encounter the view that anti-Jewish hatred has stubbornly persisted throughout the ages, irrespective of changing conditions, and has changed only superficially from period to period. To bolster this view, its proponents resist explaining antisemitism as growing out of discrete social or geographical contexts; they often describe it as an irrational phenomenon that defies any clear explanation. In many cases, this detachment from context leads them to characterize antisemitism as a disease or infection, which spreads haphazardly and uncontrollably.<sup>57</sup> The danger of this approach is that it suggests that antisemitism stands outside of history, placing into question our ability to fully understand it, and ultimately our ability to learn from and respond to it.

The overly sanguine view of antisemitism that Wenger describes emerged in a post-war context in which historians of American Jewry—and probably many average Jews as well—wished to highlight the promise of American life and to validate their hopes for

integration and acceptance. The very different view that I have just described—what historian Jonathan Judaken has termed the “eternalist” conception of antisemitism—has flourished in more recent decades, as a thoroughly integrated American Jewish population has tended to worry more about shoring up Jewish distinctiveness than about fitting in. Although what Wenger describes as students’ increasing awareness and concern about antisemitism undoubtedly derives from the recent uptick in anti-Jewish activity in the United States, their understanding of the nature of antisemitism is likely shaped by the pervasiveness of the eternalist perspective in contemporary Jewish discourse. As a result, in teaching about antisemitism, our task is not simply to revise outdated historical narratives; we need to emphasize the much more basic necessity of historicizing antisemitism to begin with.<sup>58</sup>

Fortunately, the pedagogical approaches suggested by Wenger are as helpful for countering the eternalist view of antisemitism as they are for challenging the “disappearing antisemitism” narrative of the postwar period. Her emphasis on contextualizing antisemitism within the broader landscape of American racism, for example, is key to understanding the specificity of its historical development in the United States. By comparing Jews with and viewing them in relation to America’s other racial and ethnic groups, students will also come to grasp how the Jewish experience has both resembled and diverged from those of other minorities. In addition, they will be challenged to grapple with complexity and to question simple dichotomies that are often assumed to structure power and define marginalization in American life. Such an approach might demonstrate, for example, how Jews have in some ways continued to share the vulnerability typical of American minority groups, while also increasingly benefiting from white privilege. It might also provide examples of how antisemitism and anti-black racism can combine to play mutually supporting roles in the worldview of white supremacists, even though they may differ in their origins and motivations.

No less crucial is Wenger’s charge to examine change over time, which, after all, is the most basic task of historicization. Students need to understand that different eras present different social contexts, which shape antisemitism in different ways. Despite some obvious threads of historical continuity, American antisemitism of today emanates from different sources and is expressed through different frameworks than the American antisemitism of the pre-World War II period. That does not mean it is more benign: the Pittsburgh Massacre can rightfully be called the worst antisemitic event in U.S. history. But antisemitism today is not as endemic as it was a century ago, when discrimination in housing, employment, education, and social life were factors of everyday life for Jews. Another major difference is the degree of power and status Jews wield in American life today, as opposed to the relatively powerless position they occupied during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Many of the types of discrimination Jews experienced then are simply not feasible today, in a world where Jews hold the presidencies of Ivy League colleges that once excluded them; where there are more Jews than Protestants on the Supreme Court; and where the Kennedys, Clintons, and Trumps call Jews family. On the other hand, while these developments certainly trouble the notion of a stable, “eternal” antisemitism, Jews cannot be said to have “overcome.” As Wenger notes, the prominence held by Jews today in many walks of life has itself become a rallying point for contemporary antisemites. In short, change happens, but not necessarily in a linear fashion.

If students can learn to situate antisemitism in particular time periods and social contexts, they will better grasp the nuances that Wenger so rightly calls for. Only then can they expect to truly understand it and begin to address its impact on their own lives and surroundings.

## Notes

- 1 Semantic, ideological, and epistemological debate surround the terms themselves in the vast, multidisciplinary literature on anti-Semitism. This forum's use of terms is knowingly inconsistent; may the sense of unsettledness about terminology and definition heighten readers' acuity and need for inquiry. For more on the debates, see "Rethinking Anti-Semitism Roundtable," *The American Historical Review* 123(4), October 2018, particularly Jonathan Judaken's "Introduction," pp. 1122–38; and David Feldman's "Toward a History of the Term 'Anti-Semitism,'" pp. 1139–50; Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013); David Engel, "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism" in J. Cohen and M. Rosman, eds., *Rethinking European Jewish History* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009).
- 2 The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is a Berlin-based consortium of scholars and thirty-four government members that supports educators and policy makers on active global genocide prevention, and education on the Holocaust and antisemitism, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism?focus=antisemitismandholocaustdenial> (accessed Dec. 12, 2019). Its definition of antisemitism was adopted in the 2019 U.S. Federal "Executive Order Combatting Anti-Semitism," such that Jews might be covered by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.
- 3 Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 4 See Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. chaps. 2 and 5; and my more specialized article, "The Unstable Other: Locating the Jew in Progressive-Era American Racial Discourse," *American Jewish History* 89 (Dec. 2001): 383–409.
- 5 See, for example, Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900–1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979); Stephen Mostov, "Dun and Bradstreet Reports as a Source of Jewish Economic History: Cincinnati, 1840–1875," *American Jewish History* 72 (Mar. 1983): 333–53; John Higham, "Social Discrimination Against Jews in America, 1830–1930," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 47 (Sept. 1957): 1–33; Marianne Sanaa, *Going Greek: Jewish College Fraternities in the United States, 1895–1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Jeffrey Gurock, "The 1913 New York State Civil Rights Act," *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 93–120; Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 265; Antero Pietila, *Not In My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 135–36.
- 6 John Higham, "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (Mar. 1957): 559–78; Edward S. Shapiro, "John Higham and American Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age," *American Jewish History* 76 (Dec. 1986): 201–13.
- 7 Naomi W. Cohen, "Antisemitism in the Gilded Age: The Jewish View," *Jewish Social Studies* 41 (Summer–Autumn 1979): 187–210.
- 8 Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1998).
- 9 Spencer Blakeslee, *The Death of American Antisemitism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).
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