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John Higham and American Anti-Semitism*

Edward S. Shapiro

American historians, in contrast to their European counterparts, have not expended much effort in examining anti-Semitism. Since the end of World War II the major examinations of American anti-Semitism have been done by sociologists and social psychologists, not historians, and it is unlikely that even this would have occurred without funding by the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. No important American historian has made anti-Semitism the primary focus of his work, and even Jewish historians have been more concerned with studying the prejudice directed at blacks than anti-Semitism.

Undoubtedly the major reason for this lacuna is the relative lack of prominence of anti-Semitism in America when compared with, say, Europe. There has not been anything in the United States remotely resembling the pogroms, expulsions, and atrocities which European Jews experienced. American historians have concluded that anti-Semitism has been an exotic and unimportant aspect of American life. For them, anti-Semitism has not been intrinsic to America, but rather a European import incompatible with the dominant liberal Jeffersonian thrust of American history. From this perspective, anti-Semitism has been a product of unusual and transitory social and economic conditions and marginal and disaffected groups.¹

Every generalization has its exception, and in this case it is John Higham, the most distinguished historian of anti-Semitism in America. Leonard Dinnerstein, himself a student of American anti-Semitism, has described Higham's writings on anti-Semitism as "consistently thoughtful, detailed, and complex." No other American historian, Dinnerstein concluded, has written "as deeply or as extensively" about American anti-Semitism. David A. Gerber, the editor of *Anti-Semitism in American History* (1986), agreed, noting

* Research for this essay was made possible by a grant from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation.

1 Michael N. Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, Conn.: 1979), pp. 3-4; David A. Gerber, "Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile Relations in American Historiography and the American Past," in Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana, Ill.: 1986), pp. 7-8; Jonathan D. Sarna, "Anti-Semitism and American History," *Commentary*, LXII (March, 1981), 42; Leonard Dinnerstein, ed., *Antisemitism in the United States* (New York: 1971), p. 2.

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that Higham is “doubtless the leading theorist in the history of American anti-Semitism.”²

Higham came to prominence in 1955 with the appearance of his first book, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, a revised version of his University of Wisconsin doctoral dissertation, directed by Merle Curti, the dean of American intellectual historians. The book was well-received by Higham’s peers and has remained in print for the past three decades. Upon publication, it immediately became the definitive history of American nativism, and its author took his place among the most perceptive students of American ethnic relationships. Largely because of *Strangers in the Land*, Higham became Moses Coit Tyler University Professor of History at the University of Michigan and later Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University.

Higham’s investigation of American nativism led to a lifelong interest in American Jewish history and particularly in anti-Semitism. (A 1975 collection of his essays was titled *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America*.) As a gentile who came to American Jewish history through his interest in American nativism, Higham believes anti-Semitism is not *sui generis* but part of the “patterns of American nativism.” Thus anti-Semitism has been important not for its own sake but for what it can teach us about American immigration, ethnicity, and social and economic mobility.

The research and writing of *Strangers in the Land* occurred during a dramatic decline in American anti-Semitic opinion and behavior from its highwater mark during the 1930’s and World War II. Due in part to the impact of the European Holocaust on America, the years after World War II witnessed a sharp reduction in anti-Semitism among employers, realtors, and admissions officers at the nation’s elite universities. Higham realized that he was living in a period of diminishing Judaeophobia, a time for stressing “harmony and unity in American society.” Not surprisingly, *Strangers in the Land* emphasized the transitory and tangential character of American anti-Semitism.³

Anti-Semitism is not a major theme in *Strangers in the Land*,

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- 2 Leonard Dinnerstein, “The Historiography of American Antisemitism,” *Immigration History Newsletter*, XVI (November, 1984), 3–4; Gerber, “Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile Relations,” p. 39; Dobkowski, *Tarnished Dream*, p. 5.
 - 3 John Higham, “Ideological Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age,” in Higham, ed., *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: 1975), pp. 117–118; Higham, “Anti-Semitism and American Culture,” *ibid.*, p. 191; Leonard Dinnerstein, “Anti-Semitism Exposed and Attacked, 1945–1950,” *American Jewish History*, LXXI (September, 1981), 134–149.

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and the reader seeking a fuller view of Higham's interpretation of anti-Semitism must turn to his post-1955 writings. The fact that only twenty of the three hundred and thirty pages in *Strangers in the Land's* are devoted to nativist attitudes toward Jews is not fortuitous. Higham argued that nativism was a constellation of ideas consisting of anti-radicalism, racism, and anti-Catholicism. Anti-Semitism, he contended, was not one of the important patterns of nativism, and nativists did not focus on Jews, generally lumping them together with other undesirable immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Furthermore, prejudice against Italians and Orientals was far greater than anti-Semitism.

For Higham, the anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was caused by the social and economic tensions produced by urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and the transformation of rural life. The extent of anti-Semitism oscillated with the intensity of these tensions. Thus it peaked during the depression of 1893–1897 and the flapper years of the 1920's. In the 1890's, agrarian radicals saw Jews manipulating the currency and exploiting farmers. "Since greedy destructive forces seemed somehow at work in the government and economy," Higham wrote, "suspicion dawned that a Jewish bid for supremacy was wreaking the havoc America could not control." In addition, Jews were disliked because of their rapid upward social and economic mobility. They were the classic upstarts, the Snopeses of urban America. At a time of pervasive social climbing, the Jew symbolized "the parvenu spirit." Jews were "acquisitive barbarians", personifying the mercenary spirit which was replacing manners and tradition with vulgarity and ostentatiousness. Despite the Shylock image, Higham believed that anti-Semitism "probably did not exceed in degree the general level of feeling against other European nationalities."⁴

The situation changed after World War I. "Of all the European groups that lay outside of the charmed Nordic circle," Higham claimed, "none was subjected to quite so much hatred as the Jews." Jews now faced "a sustained agitation that singled them out from the other new immigrants blanketed by racial nativism – an agitation that reckoned them the most dangerous force undermining the nation." The Jew became a satanic revolutionary beholden to an international cabal of capitalists and Bolsheviks bent on subverting American morality. Higham contended that this upsurge of anti-Semitism was due to the "decline of progressivism," and that the anti-Semitic Henry Ford embodied a progressive spirit gone sour.⁵

4 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1955), pp. 26–27, 66–67, 93–94, 160–161.

5 Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 277–286.

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Higham's interpretation of anti-Semitism left many unanswered questions. The first concerns his argument that the roots of American anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth century resulted from rapid Jewish social mobility and the tensions of a dynamic society. This said nothing about the nature and origin of the anti-Semitic stereotypes themselves. Why, for example, did Populists and patricians alike stress the image of the Jew as Shylock? It would appear that American anti-Semitism was part of a transnational mindset, not merely a response to indigenous American conditions, since the same anti-Semitic imagery was found in America and Europe. Furthermore, the discovery by Naomi W. Cohen, Michael Dobkowski, and other historians of a significant amount of anti-Semitism prior to the Gilded Age challenges Higham's argument that anti-Semitism originated in the social and economic competition of the 1870's and 1880's.⁶

Another problem with Higham's interpretation of American anti-Semitism, stemming from his downplaying of its intellectual origins, is the complete absence in *Strangers in the Land* of any discussion of Christian anti-Semitism. The relationship between Christianity and anti-Semitism is, of course, controversial. There has been a strong philo-Semitic strain within American Protestantism, and yet Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark's *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (1966) could argue that the roots of contemporary American anti-Semitism were religious and theological. Certainly some evaluation in *Strangers in the Land* of the religious component of anti-Semitism would have been desirable, particularly in view of the strength of evangelical Protestantism at the time. One of Higham's "patterns" of nativism was anti-Catholicism, indicating that people at that time did take religion seriously. And yet in *Strangers in the Land* and elsewhere, Higham scarcely mentions the relationship between American Christianity and anti-Semitism. This is puzzling, particularly since the focus of *Strangers in the Land* is supposedly on nativist ideas.

A third difficulty regarding Higham's analysis is the connection it makes between anti-Semitism and the stresses of a pulsating society and the social mobility of Jews. *Strangers in the Land* is unconvincing in its effort to correlate the sudden and sharp increase of anti-Semitism after World War I with fundamental domestic social and economic changes and an upsurge in isolationism and nationalism. The problem remains why the Jew was viewed as the outsider,

6 Naomi W. Cohen, "Antisemitism in the Gilded Age: The Jewish View," *Jewish Social Studies*, LXI (Summer-Fall, 1979), 187 ff.; Dobkowski, *Tarnished Dream*, *passim*.

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the preeminent threat to the purity of American nationality. Furthermore, the dramatic social and economic changes since the end of World War II have not been accompanied by increasing anti-Semitism. Quite the contrary. During these four decades the American people have moved to suburbia, absorbed radical changes in the relationships between the sexes and the races, and assimilated countless economic changes, including revolutions brought on by television, the jet plane, and the computer. This period has also seen the most dramatic status and economic gains among Jews in the nation's history and also a sharp decline in anti-Semitism to its lowest point since the Civil War. Certainly other factors besides Jewish social mobility and social and economic change are responsible for American anti-Semitism.

One can also question Higham's assumption that anti-Semitism is simply an aspect of nativism. The acceptance by Americans of diverse social and economic situations of anti-Semitic stereotypes similar to those found in Europe would seem to indicate otherwise. David Gerber's criticism is apt. He complained of Higham's tendency "to collapse anti-Semitism into a species of nativism; thus it becomes not unlike other prejudices against American white ethnic groups." Higham for his part, has argued that ethnic history written by insiders has a "special empathic flavor" and tends toward parochialism, while that written by more cosmopolitan historians reveals "unwelcome truths."

Finally, Higham's conclusion that the anti-Semitism of the 1920's resulted from the "failure of democratic morale" and repressive nationalism is open to question. His dichotomy between democracy, reform, and tolerance on the one hand and conservatism, reaction, and anti-Semitism on the other is incompatible with the fact that some of the leading Progressives were also anti-Semites who blamed Jews for the social conditions of urban America. Immigration restriction was one of the great Progressive reforms, and it became operative during the greatest of all manifestations of the progressive mind, American involvement in World War I. Nor does there appear to be any simple correlation between nationalism and the fear of radicalism and anti-Semitism. While the Great Red Scare of 1919 occurred in a period of increasing anti-Semitism, the Second Great Red Scare of the 1950's took place at a time of diminishing anti-Semitism. In fact, several of the chief red-baiters of the McCarthyite era were Jews. Furthermore, the backlash during the 1960's and

7 Gerber, "Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile Relations," p. 39; John Higham, "Paleface and Redskin in American Historiography: A Comment," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVI (Summer, 1985), 113.

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1970's against the New Left and anti-Vietnam protests was not accompanied by anti-Semitism

While the identification of anti-Semitism with reaction is unconvincing, it does provide a key to understanding Higham the historian. He is a left-of-center historian, a critic and yet an apostle of liberal and progressive historiography. *Strangers in the Land* appeared at a difficult time for liberals. Eisenhower was president, the conservative intellectual movement was just beginning, and leftwing intellectuals were experiencing a crisis of faith. Some historians, most notably Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., continued to identify with the progressive historiographical legacy of Charles A. Beard and Vernon Louis Parrington which emphasized social conflict, regional rivalries, and economic divisions. Other historians, however, had a conservative orientation more in keeping with the spirit of the decade. They were sceptical of mass movements, including supposedly democratic ones such as Populism, stressed the continuity of the American experience, and emphasized the accomplishments, as well as the warts, of American history. A "consensus" school emerged which drew attention to an underlying political and ideological uniformity among Americans regarding the beneficence of private property, political decentralization, and private enterprise. During the 1940's and 1950's devotees of the "American Studies" movement were busy studying the myths and values which united Americans, while a mini-industry explored the relevance of Alexis de Tocqueville and his famous book, *Democracy in America*.

Coming of age during the 1940's and 1950's, John Higham could not help but be influenced by the debate among American historians regarding the relevance of progressive historiography. In addition to his work in immigration and ethnic history, Higham has written extensively on American historiography, and it is not surprising that his interpretation of American anti-Semitism reflects his underlying historiographical orientation. Writing as an historian of the Left, Higham was sceptical of this new emphasis on cohesion, tradition, and stability. His famous essay "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing our History," published in *Commentary*, then a journal of the Left, attacked the new conservative direction of Americanists, particularly Daniel J. Boorstin. The conservative frame of reference, he claimed, "creates a paralyzing incapacity to deal with the elements of spontaneity, effervescence, and violence in American history." Ironically, in view of the emphasis his interpretation of American anti-Semitism placed on social rather than intellectual factors, Higham claimed that "contemporary conservatism has a deadening effect on the historian's ability to take a conflict of ideas seriously."

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While recognizing that the simple dualisms of progressive historiography (farm versus town, agrarian versus industrialist, West versus East, Jefferson versus Hamilton) were inadequate, Higham worried that historians were rejecting as well the moral values which had animated the progressive historians: "an appreciation of the crusading spirit, a responsiveness to indignation, a sense of injustice." Boorstin's books were bereft of "any connection with a larger universe of values," while his stress on the practicality of Americans was simply a "celebration of the mindlessness of American life," an acceptance of "any circumstances that can be labeled as distinctively American."⁸

In his appropriately entitled 1962 essay "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," Higham elaborated on the place of moral judgment in historical writing. Consensus history, he feared, threatened scholarship with "moral complacency, parading often in the guise of neutrality." The profession needed an infusion of the moral energy which had motivated progressive historiography, and he encouraged his colleagues to embark upon "a more widely ranging and subtler moral criticism than American professional historians have yet undertaken." The historian, conscious of his moral responsibility, should be sensitive not only to what took place in the past but also to what could have taken place. His work should reflect a "knowledge of the elements of good and evil discoverable in a particular historical setting."⁹

Higham's *History* (1965) noted that while conservative and consensus historians had been glorifying the American past, historians of the Left, including himself, had "discovered a vein of prejudice in liberal thought," an insensitivity and disinterest regarding race. *Strangers in the Land's* emphasis on social and ethnic divisions, its illumination of a darker aspect of American history, and its applauding of the democratic heritage of open immigration was Higham's major answer to consensus historiography as well as an example of the moral history he recommended to his peers. The question remained, however, whether his moralistic approach, his deemphasizing of the uniqueness of anti-Semitism, and his slighting of the depths of anti-Semitism significantly advanced the understanding of American anti-Semitism. The answer to that would

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- 8 John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary*, XXVII (January, 1959), 93-100; John Higham with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1965), pp. 213, 221.
 - 9 John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," in Higham, ed., *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington, Ind.: 1970), pp. 138-156.

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have to wait until the publication of Higham's essays on American anti-Semitism.¹⁰

"Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation" and "Social Discrimination Against Jews in America, 1830-1930" appeared in 1957, "Another Look at Nativism" in 1958, and "American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered"¹¹ in 1966. These were revised and reprinted in *Send These to Me*. When "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age" was reprinted, its title had been changed to "Ideological Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age," perhaps to mollify those who had claimed *Strangers in the Land* had downplayed the ideological dimension of American anti-Semitism. Here he noted that anti-Semitism had been a minor factor in American history, criticized the leftwing interpretation of Carey McWilliams and others which blamed American anti-Semitism on conservatives and spokesmen for privilege, and denied that rural radicalism had been an influential determinant in the increase in anti-Semitism during the Gilded Age. "The whole agrarian crusade of the late nineteenth century," he wrote, "drew vitality from the best traditions of American democracy and Christianity."¹¹

Instead, Higham looked to urban social and economic factors – particularly conflicts between a growing Jewish population and other ethnic groups, an economy which oscillated between flush and hard times, and the rapid Jewish advancement up the social and economic ladder – for the explanation of anti-Semitism, all the while recognizing that anti-Semitism was a minor theme in the late nineteenth century. Higham also repeated the contention of *Strangers in the Land* that anti-Semitism was part of a broader anti-immigrant movement. Anti-Semitism, he argued, "formed an integral part of a larger, more complex upswing of anti-foreign feeling."¹²

Higham's argument that anti-Semitism resulted from the interaction between Jewish social and economic mobility on the one hand and domestic tensions on the other necessarily led him to emphasize the urban context of anti-Semitism. Here he remained true to the progressive historiographical legacy which had been far more sympathetic toward the problems of rural than those of urban America. In the 1950's there had been an often bitter debate among historians regarding the relationship between the rural radicalism of the 1890's and anti-Semitism. Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, and Peter Viereck, among others, claimed that Populism's stress on the money

10 Higham, *History*, p. 213.

11 Higham, "Ideological Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age," p. 123.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

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question, its distrust of urban America, its search for scapegoats, and its desire to return to a golden age prior to urbanization, industrialization, and mass immigration had, in Hofstadter's words, "activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism in the United States." Higham, while admitting that anti-Semitism was not unknown among the Populists, nevertheless claimed that it was at most a trivial aspect of Populism. Much more important was the animus toward Jews felt by other urban ethnic groups and by members of the urban middle-class fearful of being engulfed by a Jewish wave.¹³

There was no place for Christian anti-Semitism in Higham's analysis since, from his perspective, anti-Semitism was part of nativism, and American Christian leaders were not of one mind regarding immigration. With the exception of the Jews, virtually all the immigrants were Christians, and it would have been incongruous for native American Christians to oppose immigration on religious grounds. It is true that some Protestants opposed immigration from southern and eastern Europe because most of these immigrants were Roman Catholic, but even they generally preferred to argue against large-scale immigration on social, economic, and political grounds. With Christianity on the sidelines regarding immigration, Higham had to downplay the religious roots of American anti-Semitism, particularly when he believed that anti-Semitism was of minor importance. Since Christianity was a fundamental element of American history and anti-Semitism was unimportant, it logically followed that American Christianity could not have been permeated with anti-Semitism. He preferred to attribute anti-Semitism to hard times, particularly during periods of intense nationalism, and especially among those who resented Jewish economic and social advancement. The economic interpretation, he concluded, "offers a still valid insight."¹⁴

The argument that anti-Semitism was a backlash to Jewish suc-

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- 13 Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: 1955), pp. 77-91; Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York: 1955); Irwin Unger, *The Greenback Era* (Princeton, N.J.: 1964); William F. Holmes, "Whitecapping: Anti-Semitism in the Populist Era," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, LXIII (March, 1974), esp. 261; C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *American Scholar*, LIX (Winter, 1959-60), 55-72; Norman Pollack, "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review*, LXVIII (October, 1962), 76-80; Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: 1963), chs. 1-2; Arthur Liebman, "Anti-Semitism in the Left?" in Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History*, p. 336.
- 14 Higham, "Ideological Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age," pp. 128-29. Ideological anti-Semitism, Higham wrote, "concentrated on economic rather than religious

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cess was more fully developed in Higham's "Social Discrimination Against Jews, 1830-1930." For Americans unable to comprehend the dizzying pace of change of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and upset by the "general struggle for place and privilege," the Jew was a handy target – the vulgar parvenu who had "upset the equilibrium of urban life." Higham noted that, in contrast to other groups, "the Jews reaped more and more dislike as they bettered themselves. The more avidly they reached out for acceptance and participation in American life, the more their reputation seemed to suffer." Higham attributed this to the more rapid progress of Jews, but it could just as easily have been argued that this progress triggered latent and distinctly anti-Jewish hostility. Higham refused to take this tack, however, because it would have weakened his underlying thesis that anti-Semitic behavior was simply a variant of nativism.¹⁵

While willing to admit that ideology has played "a major role in Jewish-gentile relationships," Higham refused to believe that it was responsible for social discrimination against Jews, and he denigrated the importance of Christianity or racism in fomenting anti-Semitism in America. Instead, he argued that the most significant ideological attack on the American Jew revolved around the mythical international Jewish conspiracy of communists and bankers, but he rejected any correlation between the popularity of this myth and social discrimination against Jews. "Discrimination, a product of status rivalries in an urban middle class, rested on foundations much more tangible than the specters that sometimes haunted the rural imagination." Higham is thus forced to fall back upon "status rivalries," a popular chestnut of the 1950s and one frequently used by critics of liberal historiography, to explain anti-Semitic behavior.¹⁶

In "Another Look at Nativism" Higham elaborated on his understanding of nativism. He continued to argue that nativism was, in essence, an ideological opposition to Catholics, radicals, and the supposedly racially inferior. He was quick to point out that nativism, as he understood it, did not encompass all of America's ethnic tensions. Anti-Semitism, he asserted, resulted not from irrational myths "but rather from the structure of society." The struggles for status, he wrote, "underlie much that we attribute too easily to irrational prejudice," while "the question of status has touched the daily

themes, on Shylock rather than Judas." Higham, "Anti-Semitism and American Culture," in Higham, ed., *Send These to Me*, p. 181.

15 Higham, "Social Discrimination Against Jews, 1830-1930," in Higham, ed., *Send These to Me*, pp. 147, 166-167.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 168-172.

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life of most Americans more intimately than any ideological warfare.”¹⁷

If American anti-Semitism has resulted from “a general middle-class scramble for prestige” which Jews participated in, then how can one explain the post-World War II decline in anti-Semitism? This occurred at the same time that Jews became the chief executive officer of the Dupont Corporation, the Secretary of State, the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth College, and the University of Chicago, the chairman of the *Wall Street Journal*, and the football coach at Brown University. A backlash against Jewish success should have resulted among the “guardians of distinction,” who presumably would have feared a Jewish invasion. But nothing of the sort took place, primarily because the climate of ideas of postwar America was hostile to anti-Semitism and other forms of racism.¹⁸

One possible key to Higham’s emphasis on status anxieties as a source of anti-Semitism is found in his statement that “we must assume . . . that in a competitive society everything which differentiates one group from another involves a potential conflict of interest.” Thus, for Higham, differences are most likely to result in conflicts of interest. This can be contrasted with Adam Smith’s argument that competition results in harmony among individuals and nations as all strive to secure their own self-interest. Competition, Smith believed, produces the maximum amount of goods at the lowest prices, focuses energies on productive enterprise, and de-emphasizes the ethnic, religious, and dynastic rivalries conducive to warfare.¹⁹

Higham’s interpretation of anti-Semitism reflects a distaste for the competitive ethos and a longing for harmony prevalent within much of twentieth-century western intelligentsia. His 1966 essay “American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered” (published in a revised version as “Anti-Semitism and American Culture” in *Send These to Me*) made this explicit. Here he attributed the decline of post-war anti-Semitism to assimilationist tendencies within the Jewish community. The more Jews became Americanized, the more receptive was the dominant culture to Jewish aspirations. This Americanization, he claimed, resulted from the ending of mass immigration and the dying out of the immigrant Jewish generation, the dispersal of Jews from the urban ghettos into suburbia and

17 Higham, “Another Look at Nativism,” in Higham, ed., *Send These To Me*, pp. 107–110.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

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from the Northeast to the Sun Belt, and the normalization of the Jewish economic profile and a corresponding disappearance of the “overbearing manners of the aggressive, insecure huckster.” With the diminishing of American heterogeneity, the image of the Jew “as the quintessential alien was virtually obliterated.”²⁰

This explanation overlooks the fact that, as Charles Silberman has cogently pointed out in his recent *A Certain People*, the Jewish community is more assertive today than at any time in history, that no longer are Jews governed by the principle of “shah.” Anti-Semitism has gone out of vogue not because Jews qua Jews are inconspicuous but because anti-Semitism has been discredited. Today’s American Jews engage in the most blatant ethnic diplomatic lobbying in the nation’s history, Jewish comedians sprinkle their dialogues with Yiddish, Hollywood produces films such as *Yentl* and *The Frisco Kid*, and American Jewish novelists writing about Jews have won numerous Pulitzer Prizes and even Nobel Prizes. And yet there has not been any gentile backlash even though this Jewish assertiveness has occurred at a time when much of America has been confronted by bizarre social and cultural changes. Higham’s assumption that the solution for anti-Semitism is a social harmony in which ethnic and religious differences are muted strikes a discordant note in this the year of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. Taken to its logical conclusion, it would lead to the ultimate homogenization of American history.²¹

Higham has clearly stated his opposition to any serious commitment to cultural pluralism. “Since the most intense ethnic feelings are highly virulent,” he wrote in 1974, “it is fortunate that ethnic identification is frequently mild.” He praised those who lacked any strong ethnic feeling since they prevented social polarization “either by muffling divisive issues or by shifting the issues to a more universal plane.”²² For the intellectually curious, the ethnic community, he claimed, was likely to be “suspicious, narrow-minded, riddled with prejudices.” America’s greatest problem in formulating a rational position regarding the competing claims of ethnic identity and cultural assimilation was “rediscovering what values can bind together a more and more kaleidoscopic culture.”²³

Higham’s sceptical approach to ethnic diversity helps explain his interpretation of American anti-Semitism. For him, American Jews

20 Higham, “Anti-Semitism and American Culture,” pp. 194–195.

21 Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: 1985).

22 Higham, “Introduction,” in Higham, *Send These to Me*, p. ix.

23 Higham, “Another American Dilemma,” in Higham, *Send These to Me*, pp. 236–246.

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make up an ethnic group which, along with other ethnic groups, will probably be swallowed up by the general culture as more and more of its most talented young reject parochial identities. With the dissipating of Jewish loyalties and distinctive Jewish social and personality characteristics, anti-Semitism will gradually disappear. Since anti-Semitism is a species of nativism, it will become attenuated by Jewish assimilation. And since Judaism as a religion and the Jewish people as a religio-ethnic community have no place in Higham's schema, there is no need for him to discuss that type of anti-Semitism produced by Christianity.

While Higham was developing his interpretation of American anti-Semitism, a competing diagnosis had appeared in 1950. Edited by T. W. Adorno and several other refugees from Nazi Germany, *The Authoritarian Personality* provided an analysis of American anti-Semitism radically different from Higham's. Not only did it argue that anti-Semitism was the most basic and distinctive of prejudices, but it also posited an "authoritarian personality" prone to anti-Semitism. This personality was rigid, religious, distrustful of ambiguity, and suspicious of change. It is not surprising that Higham believed *The Authoritarian Personality* to be a "ponderous, pretentious, often confusing" volume. He found objectionable not only its emphasis on anti-Semitism as the primordial hatred, but he also doubted the existence of any authoritarian personality irrespective of the historical peculiarities of different societies. He contended that the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* had mistakenly applied a paradigm derived from Europe to the completely dissimilar conditions of America. Finally, Higham objected to *The Authoritarian Personality's* reification of the concept of prejudice. This left no room for the social and economic circumstances which had been emphasized in *Strangers in the Land* and the essays in *Send These to Me*. For Higham, American anti-Semitism was an unimportant and temporary phenomenon resulting from the dislocations of urbanization and industrialization.²⁴

Higham has been the most perceptive historian of American anti-Semitism. Influenced by progressive historiography, conscious of the uniqueness of American history, and sensitive to the nuances of Jewish history, his analysis bore the marks of the intellectual milieu of the postwar years. It is the task of his successors to supplement his interpretation, to provide both a greater role for ideas in the origins of American anti-Semitism and a greater appreciation of the uniqueness of American Jewish history.

24 Higham, "Anti-Semitism and American Culture," pp. 174-176.