Review: The Outsiders

Reviewed Work(s): Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin. by Michael Lerner and Cornel West: Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments. by Paul Berman

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Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/2935293
THE OUTSIDERS

Blacks and Jews and the soul of America

Julius Lester

The black-Jewish coalition of the civil rights era is remembered as a paragon of trans-racial solidarity, a shining example of what was, could be, and should be again. But as important as that coalition was, as inspirational as it may be retrospectively, it involved only a small, if very effective, elite. Through the golden haze of hindsight the coalition appears like a mass inter-racial love-in. It was not.

It is an egregious error to believe that the black-Jewish coalition represented the only contact between the two groups. Blacks and Jews also interacted under conditions of severe inequality, where Jews were the “haves” and blacks the “have-nots.” In Chicago and Harlem in the 1930s, Jewish-owned stores refused to hire blacks as clerks; blacks responded with boycotts and riots.

Today it is thought that black anti-Semitism is something new, representative of a moral decline in black-Jewish relations. But black anger toward, and black resentment of, Jews is not new, not even among black intellectuals. In the early thirties influential black intellectuals used the rise of Hitler as an opportunity to chastise American Jews. George Schuyler, the acerbic black journalist, wrote that he would “wail a lot louder and deeper if American Jews would give more concrete evidence of being touched by the plight of Negroes.” He complained that Jewish businesses hired blacks only in “menial capacities,” making them no different than “Gentile-owned businesses,” that hotels and restaurants owned or managed by Jews refused service to blacks as quickly as “those owned by Catholics and Protestants. . . . If my Hebrew friends were only as quick to employ Negroes as they are other people, and did not get so excited when a decent family moves in their districts, I would pray even harder for Hitler to let up on them.”

The Afro-American newspaper editorialized:

The Hebrews who get it in the neck are entitled to sympathy, but they, themselves, are not basically opposed to the Hitler principle. They, too, believe in hanging together and letting the
devil take the hindmost. If you doubt it, try to get a job as a clerk in one of those Pennsylvania Avenue department stores. . . . there you will find Hitlerism in its most blatant form exercised by those who are being Hitlerized in Germany.

The preeminent black intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois, complained that “[w]hen the only ‘inferior’ peoples were ‘niggers,’” The New York Times gave little attention to “race, lynching and mobs. But now that the damned include the owner of the Times, moral indignation is perking up.”

Resentment and anger toward Jews, as well as outright black anti-Semitism, are not aberrations, contemporary threats to a perfect union. A black antipathy toward Jews has always existed but has been willfully overlooked by liberals among both blacks and Jews.

In Zora Neale Hurston’s introduction to her classic collection, Mules and Men, there is a dramatic folktale which says much about the roots of black anti-Semitism.

When God created people, He didn’t give them their souls. God knew that the soul was very powerful and he wanted to wait until people were strong enough to hold their souls in their bodies. God kept the soul beneath the skirts of his garment and one day, a white man walked past God and just as he did, a little breeze lifted up the hem of God’s skirt and some light from the soul streamed out and it was so bright that the white man got scared and ran away.

Next day, a black man was walking past God and he got curious about the soul, so he went over and tried to peek under God’s skirt and the light and warmth from the soul was so powerful that it knocked him over and he ran away. A few days later, along came the Jew.

He was walking past God when a big wind came and lifted up God’s skirt. The Jew saw the soul gleaming brightly and streaming with lights of many colors and he ran and grabbed the soul. Well, the soul was so powerful that it knocked the Jew down and rolled him over and over on the ground. But the Jew wouldn’t let go. That soul knocked him up in the sky and back down on the ground, but the Jew still wouldn’t let go. The Jew hugged the soul so hard that it broke into a lot of little pieces. The white man and the black man came and picked up the little pieces and put them inside and that’s how man got his soul. But one of these days, God is going to make the Jew divide that soul up fair so everybody gets equal amounts.

Although this is not classic Christian anti-Semitism, it is profoundly theological. The Jew is unwilling to live within the bounds established by God; lacking in scruples, he tries to keep the soul to himself. Though his greed gives him away, he still ends up with a larger portion than black and white, who share the scraps. The “coalition” in the parable is not between black and Jew, but between black and white, and the ending portends divine retribution against the Jews.

The story projects onto Jews a superior spiritual power. Jews have always been so represented in Western culture. First Christians, then Muslims, have asserted that they are God’s chosen people, come to supplant the Jews. Today, Louis Farrakhan presents himself as God’s messenger, sent “to make the Jew divide that soul up fair so everybody gets equal amounts.”

This I want the Jews to know and we want the world to know: that they are not the chosen people of God. . . .
The Holy Koran charges the Jews with taking the message of God and altering that message and giving the people a book written by their own hands, saying that the book is from God. . . . [T]he Jews . . . fed a corrupted light through this book and were the father of false religions and false religious practices. They cannot be considered the friend of God, doing such evil.

I am not anti-Jew. I am pro-truth, but in this serious hour, the truth must be told so that the true people of God may come up into the view of the entire world. These that have stolen our identity, these that have dressed themselves up in our garments must be defrocked today, that the world may see who are the true and chosen people of Almighty God.

The story of blacks and Jews in America is also a story of projections. At one time the projections were almost all positive; now they are almost all negative. What remains constant is the fact of misperception, for by their very nature projections are not concerned with muddy reality and its murky truths. Projections use another in an attempt to make oneself whole.

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The primary misconception blacks and Jews have shared is the reassuring notion they have a common experience of oppression. What they really shared was as compelling as love itself— isolation and loneliness in Western history, a longing for acceptance, a need to be seen as members of the human family. If the wider society did not regard them with sympathy, blacks and Jews could be tender with each other, as they were both regarded as Others, equally unassimilable.

It was in the time of slavery that blacks discovered in the Christian Old Testament another enslaved people, the Jews. In the story of the Israelites in Egypt and their deliverance from bondage, black slaves found a mirror of their own situation and a divine rationale for it. This is powerfully expressed in the spiritual, “Go Down, Moses”:

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go!

Refrain:
Go down, Moses,
'Way down in Egypt's Land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go!

The most-repeated line is “Let my people go!”—let God’s people go. Inspired by the story of the Israelites, the black slaves interpreted their own condition of enslavement as a sign that they, too, had been chosen. It’s worth noting, here, that the song is sung with God’s voice in the first person: the slaves didn’t sing about God setting them free. They sang as God.

The bondage and exodus of the Israelites was not the only religious motif of which the slaves availed themselves. More powerful was the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, in which the slaves found the ultimate expression of unmerited suffering redeemed. The supremacy of Jesus over Jews is made explicit in lines from the spirituals:

Virgin Mary had one son,
The cruel Jews had him hung.
Ride in, kind Jesus, who set po’ sinner free,
For Jesus come an’ lock de do’.
De Jews killed po’ Jesus.

O, Mary was a woman, and she had a one son,
Says, look at de people dat is born of God.
And de Jews and de Romans had him hung
Says, look at de people dat is born of God.

Oh, dey called ole Noah foolish man,
Built his ark upon dry sand.
Foolish Jews come a-riding by,
Hawk and spit on Noah’s timber.

Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars s lain
Could give a guilty conscience peace,
Or wash away the stain.

How was it possible for the slaves to use Moses as a metaphor for freedom and still castigate Jews? It is not clear they thought of Moses as a Jew. He was an Israelite, and Israelites were perceived as proto-Christians, while Jews were the enemies of Christ. Even the great Frederick Douglass, who elsewhere praised Jews as a model for blacks, used “the Jews” negatively when explaining how a nation that professed democracy could also produce the Dred Scott decision: “[A] people may have excellent law, and detestable practices. Our Savior denounces the Jews, because they made void the law by their traditions.”

After the Civil War, additional meaning was found in the story of the children of Israel in Egypt by Edward Wilmot Blyden, the nineteenth century Pan-Africanist and philo-Semite. In Blyden’s view, blacks and Jews were the possessors of an enormous transformative power; their sufferings “served to develop the spiritual side of their natures, and fitted them to be the spiritual leaders of the world.” Without the moral and spiritual leadership only “the Negro and the Jew” could provide, Europe would end in ruin, morally bankrupted and physically destroyed by its relentless focus on “material and scientific progress.”

As a believer in black separatism and the voluntary repatriation of American blacks to Africa, Blyden was emboldened by the publication of Theodor Herzl’s J udenstaat (1896), calling Zionism “that marvellous movement.”

There is hardly a man in the civilized world—Christian, Mohammedan, or Jew—who does not recognize the claim and right of the Jew to the Holy Land; and there are few who, if the conditions were favourable, would not be glad to see them return in a body and take their place in the land of their fathers as a great—a leading—secular power.
He wanted to inculcate among blacks a “pride of race” capable of sustaining a “black Zionism,” because it was such racial pride that had given Jews their “unquestionable vitality.”

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, although there was little actual contact between the two groups, Jews came to occupy an exalted place in the black imagination—a place they still occupy, if the virulence of present-day black anti-Semitism is any indication. In 1880 Frederick Douglass wrote “The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States,” in
which he urged Southern blacks to stand firm against the terrorist attacks of the re-emboldened slaveholding oligarchy. He argued that blacks should strive to be more like Jews: when Jews were refused admittance to a hotel, they didn’t get “up another exodus.” Instead, the Jew would “quietly ‘put money in his purse’ and bide his time.” Douglass concluded that blacks must become like Jews and be “more economical, stick to our employment and live within our means. If you do people will respect you. Other races, notably the Jews and the Quakers, worse situated than you
are, have fought their way up.” In an 1884 speech called “The Future of the Negro,” Douglass said that although Jews were “despised and hated in Europe” they had “risen ... to higher consideration. ... In like manner the Negro will rise in social scale.”

One hundred and ten years later a similar picture of Jewish success is drawn, for the same purpose, by none other than Louis Farrakhan:

Success is not a mystery; success is not by chance. ... When you find a synagogue, next to it you will find a shul. What is going on in there? ... They’re teaching their people from the tradition. The school is teaching them the history of themselves and their culture, so that no matter where Jews go, they remain intact. Jews know who they are, they know their origin in the world, they know their history. But the black has been deprived of such knowledge.

Blacks are urged to shoulder adversity by cultivating ethnic solidarity and husband-

There is, perhaps, no race that has suffered so much, not so much in America as in some of the countries in Europe. But these people have clung together. They have had a certain amount of unity, pride, and love of race; and, as the years go on, they will be more and more influential in this country—a country where they were once despised, and looked upon with scorn and derision. It is largely because the Jewish race has had faith in itself. Unless the Negro learns more and more to imitate the Jew in these matters, to have faith in himself, he cannot expect to have any high degree of success.
Washington touches on an important point, however. Jews had not suffered as much in America “as in some of the countries in Europe.” Though he did not develop the thought, he named one of the essential differences in the black and Jewish experiences. The oppression Jews have in common with blacks was, for the most part, experienced by European Jews, not American Jews. While the Jewish encounter with America was not and is not free of anti-Semitism, American anti-Semitism did not organize itself into the extensive legal codes of racial segregation or the terror of decade after decade of lynchings.

In *The Jesus Bag*, black psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs observed that “[i]n Europe, the most important aspect of Jewishness was religion; in America, it is of overriding importance that Jews are white.” American Jews were gradually accorded status as “whites” because there already existed a subaltern group called “blacks.” Today, Jewish Otherness in America has been mitigated to such an extent that most Jewish leaders today see assimilation, and not anti-Semitism, as the primary threat to American Jewry. The Otherness of blacks could not be so mitigated, because it was worn in the skin.

Even in the best of integrated times, blacks were aware that Jews, despite their Jewishness, were able to move in society with less fear and more security than blacks could hope to imagine. Being born with white skin was not something for which Jews could be held responsible. Yet, the mere fact of that white skin caused an uneasiness when platitudes about sharing a common oppression were trotted out like prize show horses. How could Jews share a common oppression with blacks in a country whose telos was race? While Jewish empathy and support were welcome, something ranked in the assertion of mutual aggrievement. Not only were Jews capable of mingling with the white majority in ways blacks could not; they could also identify with the white majority in their treatment of blacks. Few blacks voiced these reservations at the time, for fear of offending their allies. But as a result, Jews continued to believe that blacks shared their enthusiasm for the black-Jewish coalition. It is no surprise, then, that Jews felt betrayed when blacks began to express their misgivings, accusing Jews of being paternalistic, condescending, or worse.

The black-Jewish encounter has been marred by insecurity and compensatory idealization. Whether blacks mouthed anti-Semitic clichés or lionized Jews, what they were really expressing was a sense of black inferiority. Douglass exhorted blacks to emulate the Jewish response to anti-Semitism by gradually building up economic power; in doing so, he intimated that blacks lack drive and discipline. When the *New York Age* editorialized in 1905 that “[f]eeling for those who are oppressed is a lesson which the oppressed should learn [and the] Jews have...”
learned it,” the implication was that blacks lacked the empathy and compassion that come from self-esteem.

Gerald Early, chairman of the African and Afro-American Studies Department at Washington University, wrote of a trip he took to Israel with a group of blacks. After visiting Yad Vashem, the black delegation was led to ask why blacks had not memorialized slavery as Jews had the Holocaust, why blacks lacked museums devoted to their history. “While in Israel I learned this about the black American mind,” Early said, “that blacks are in awe and jealous of the enormous achievements of Jews and, as we see it, their privileges; and we feel inferior to them.”

By comparing their historical experiences with those of Jews, blacks nurture their own deep sense of worthlessness. In seeking to elevate blacks at the expense of Jews, Minister Farrakhan and other black anti-Semites merely reinforce black self-hatred. A people who are truly proud and secure need not denigrate another people.

Many Jews are hurt by black anti-Semitism because so much of their identity as Jews is bound up in their racial liberalism

In her seminal work, In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935, Hasia Diner presents striking examples, from the Jewish press, of Jewish identification with blacks. A writer from the Yiddish Forward in 1917 compared the predicament of blacks in America to that of Jews in Russia: “The Negro diaspora, the special laws, the decrees, the pogroms and also the Negro complaints, the Negro hopes are very similar to those which we Jews . . . lived through.” Because of this perceived similarity, Jews considered themselves especially suited to be advocates for black Americans: “Many of us were oppressed in Old Russia as the Negroes in free America. We can understand them better and therefore we sound their appeal wide and quickly.”

It is remarkable that immigrant Jews with fresh memories of European anti-Semitism did not automatically opt for assimilation on coming to America. Many chose to act on behalf of the most despised

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Jewish agitation on behalf of blacks, Diner suggests, was partially the consequence of a Jewish reluctance to criticize genuine American anti-Semitism. They were “afraid to vent the full extent of their anxiety” directly, so they proceeded to do so “through the problems of blacks.” Furthermore, Jews considered themselves “cultural bridges between the white and black worlds because they understood both.” As whites, they could move more easily in the wider society, while as mem-
embers of an oppressed group, they understood what it was to be regarded as an existential Other. "Because of that empathy, the black experience had become extremely personal to Jews."

It is in no way demeaning to suggest that blacks and Jews made use of each other. Jews understood that in fighting racial discrimination they were also fighting anti-Semitism. "We would like to see the principle of equality triumph against all who would like to see a land which must be white, Christian and Protestant," an editorial in Tageblatt said.

Ultimately, however, the stakes for both parties to the black-Jewish alliance were the same—namely, complex questions of identity. One way for Jews to prove they were Americans was to become more American than the Americans—by upholding democratic ideals of equality better than mainstream Americans did. Diner observes that "taking up the cause of blacks provided American Jews with a mission in their new country, a special role which they believed they were uniquely suited to carry out." By making the cause of black civil rights their own, Jews would make democracy manifest and, also, make America safe for Jews.

In the process, however, something happened to many Jews. Empathy for...
blacks became an essential element of both secular Jewish identities and liberal religious Jewish identities. Jews took blacks into the matrix of their emotions, never imagining that blacks had not done the same. Not only was the fight for civil rights a way to make America live up to its democratic ideals, it was “perceived as a natural outgrowth of the Jewish tradition.” Involvement in the civil rights movement and efforts to relieve black oppression became a way of being Jewish, “the American version of the ‘Chosen People’ notion, the American adaption of the message from Mount Sinai.” Today, many Jews are hurt by black anger and black anti-Semitism because so much of their identity as Jews is bound up in their racial liberalism. If these Jews can no longer be liberal about blacks, who are they as Jews?

Not quoted by any of the writers in these two volumes are the similar words of sociologist Kenneth Clark:

"It is naive to assume that, because Negroes and Jews are each in their own way oppressed and insecure, this will necessarily lead to a feeling of kinship and understanding. . . . The common ground of insecurity itself may lead to an intensification of fear, suspicion and active hostility as each group competes in efforts to escape relegation to the lowest status.

Most of the writers in the Berman collection, as well as Michael Lerner and Cornel West in their book, Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin, still promulgate the view that blacks and Jews, by virtue of being blacks and Jews, exist in a state of almost divine symbiosis. Even Berman, who begins by asserting that black and Jewish histories are “barely comparable,” ends by maintaining that the “relation between Jews and blacks does not allow divorce.” Each has been shaped by “long centuries of a past [that] cannot be overcome.” Berman presumes that blacks and Jews know the past—their own, each other’s, and America’s. These two volumes make evident how little Jews and blacks know each other.

Especially disheartening is the fact that both blacks and Jews fail to understand..."
the nature of racism. For example, Cynthia Ozick’s 1993 “Afterword” to her 1972 essay “Literary Blacks and Jews” is a self-righteous and shrill denial of Jewish racism, astounding in its strident tone and its limited understanding. She begins by effectively ending any prospect of open discussion with blacks: “American Jews as a collectivity are not racist; to say so—no matter who says so—is a canard.” To characterize as liars those who differ is to be intentionally, even rudely, provocative—her jeremiad about racism is Jewish paternalism at its worst. Ozick must believe that she knows everything about racism as it affects blacks, that she knows better than blacks themselves. She describes racism as “a wholesale act of the body politic, established in law and custom,” as well as “a majority manifestation. . . . Above all, racism is measured by the proportion of its adherents in any society, or in any element of a society.” It is hard to believe that someone could be familiar with European colonial rule in Asia and Africa, as well as the era of apartheid in South Africa, and yet fail to understand that racism is not the privilege of majorities, that racism has nothing to do with numbers, and that racism can and does have a vigorous extralegal existence. She errs too when she exempts the middle class from racism by calling racism “the tic or reflex of the benighted,” “the Ku Klux Klan,” “a movement, complete with leaders and followers,” “a widespread common belief in the deficiency of certain classes of human beings,” “a lie that has taken on the public appearance of a social axiom.” What Ozick describes is institutional racism. But institutional racism is the agglomeration of historic ideals residing in the lives of individuals who, after all, create the institutions and the moral ethos in which those institutions function. By describing racism as “the tic or reflex of the benighted,” she denies the complicity of the middle and upper classes in maintaining the moral climate that gives it life, and assumes an unbecoming and unjustified air of class superiority.

Most erroneous is her description of racism as “a widespread common belief in the deficiency of certain classes of human beings.” Laurence Thomas, a black Jew, makes the same mistake in his essay when he defines racism as “the belief, immune to a wide range of evidence and explanatory consideration to the contrary, that blacks are inferior.” Norman Podhoretz takes a similar view, though his approach is different: he wants us to believe that racism is not the problem it was once. Rather, he claims, liberalism and affirmative action have damaged “the precious American principle (honored though it admittedly once was more in the breach than in the observance) of treating individuals as individuals rather than as members of a group.” Such a statement makes sense only if one ignores the fact that at its birth, the United States enshrined another principle: that blacks were not individuals—or rather, counted as three-fifths of an individual, for accounting purposes only. The institution of slavery was given legal status by the Constitution and

Podhoretz refuses to recognize that another “precious American principle” is racism
The American Jewish Congress demonstrates for black civil rights, April 6, 1960. UPI/Bettman

was defended by all three branches of government. Until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, even those blacks who were not slaves were never accorded citizenship in that nation that proclaimed liberty and justice for all.

Podhoretz refuses to recognize that another “precious American principle” is racism. To say this is not to accuse Podhoretz or Ozick or any individual of being racist; it is not to impugn anyone’s decency or good intentions. It is not even
to condemn America as a racist nation, because that is not all America is. (As Jim Sleeper observes in his passionate essay, the “freedom to denounce white liberalism depends on its very strength.”) What Podhoretz says is true, and what I am saying is also true. It is the tension between our truths that brings us closer to the truth about our nation. The painful paradox is that racism exists at the heart of the democratic ideal according to which each person is judged by his or her character. I doubt Podhoretz could ever cherish this ideal more than blacks, because it is blacks who suffer from America’s difficulty in living it.

However, where Podhoretz can say with a hint of genteel regret that that ideal has been “honored . . . more in the breach than in the observance,” the dishonoring of the ideal has left blacks in the middle of the damned breach, trying to swim in space and breath under water. Both Podhoretz and I honor this ideal. We diverge, sadly, in that he does not also express outrage and hurt and dismay and utter terror that the ideal has been dishonored, that the country simply does not seem to care very much if the ideal is ever honored. The existential loneliness of blacks in America stems in part from the fact that not only is our anger not shared, it is seldom acknowledged as being about anything more than our own fears and exaggerated responses. It will be like this as long as nonblacks (and even some blacks) refuse to understand that racism does not describe what is done to blacks. Racism describes what whites do to themselves. Most troubling is that Jews do not understand this, and if anyone should, it is they.

Racism is not what is done to blacks. Racism is what whites do to themselves.

Racism is not intrinsic to human nature. It is eminently historical, the outcome of decisions; racism is rational. I do not mean sane, though racism does not, by definition, bespeak insanity. When I say racism is rational I mean it is logical if one accepts its premise—that human characteristics and abilities are determined by race. Racism is a group’s idealization of itself in society, the world, and the universe. It confers religious identity in secular garb. George Mosse, in Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism, describes racists as having a particular set of values, “a certain concept of beauty [which is] white and classical, [and] middle class virtues of work, of moderation and honor.” In a Western society those who are not white, or do not conform to classical notions of beauty, or whose cultural values may not include work, moderation, and honor will be designated as Other, as inferior, as enemies of civilization. Within such a construct evil is blamed on the inferior races, those who do not have an appreciation for the “settled order of things.”

Racism establishes order for a group—standards of behavior and a way of understanding the world. Of course, there are many components to order—economic, political, social—but these rest on the
foundation of a deeper order, which is spiritual. The individual must have a secure place in society, and society must serve as a microcosm, a reflection of security in the universe itself. Racism provides the group with a cohesive collective identity, an identity that equates genetic makeup with beauty, morality, and civic virtues. It exalts the whole. Racism gives the group an image of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and that image is itself. By default, then, those not created in the image of the Good are evil.

When a group idealizes itself as the apotheosis of humanity, it automatically creates an Other. In *The Twelve Year Reich: A Social History of Nazi Germany*, Richard Grunberger writes:

> The white outline of the German's image of themselves—in terms of character no less than of colour—acquired definition only via the moral and physical darkness of its Jewish anti-type. Metaphysically as well as materially, the roots of the German heaven were deeply embedded in the Jewish hell. . . . [T]he majority of Germans accepted Jew-baiting . . . as an integral part of a system beneficial to themselves.

Racism and anti-Semitism are crucial to a group’s self-affirmation because they satisfy, in George Mosse’s words,

> a longing for coherence, for community and for an ideal in the face of a changing world. . . . [Racism is] part of the drive to define man’s place in nature and of the hope for an ordered, healthy and happy world. . . . [T]he racist outlook fuse[s] man’s outward appearance with his place in nature and the proper function of his soul. Scientific accomplishment, a Puritan attitude toward life—the triumphant middle-class morality, Christian religion, the ideal of beauty as symbolic of a better and healthier world were all integral facets of racism. . . . Such noble ideals as freedom, equality and tolerance would become reality only if the race were preserved and its enemies defeated. . . . Racism defined utopia against its enemies.

In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler likened blacks and Jews: “In a hybridized and negrified world all conceptions of the humanly beautiful and sublime would be lost forever. [The Aryan] is the highest image of the Lord.” That racism is a way of knowing one’s self and one’s place in the world is the central idea of *Mein Kampf*:

> The racial question gives the key not only to world history but to all human culture. . . . [The Aryan race is the] bearer of human cultural development. . . . What we must fight for is to safeguard the existence and reproduction of our race and our people, the sustenance of our children and the purity of our blood, the freedom and independence of the fatherland, so that our people may mature for the fulfillment of the mission allotted it by the creator of the universe.

Mosse’s “triumphant middle-class morality” deserves further scrutiny. The operative word is “triumphant.” There is nothing wrong with middle-class morality. Neither is there anything wrong with such aspects of middle-class morality as “cleanliness, honesty, moral earnestness, hard work and family life.” But it is wrong for the white majority to consider these characteristics as being somehow exclusively theirs. Substitute “family values” for “middle-class morality” and observe that racism is still very much with us. The
A part of this nation is struggling to reach a consensus that racism violates the community as a whole. To reach that consensus, however, we must be attentive to the subtleties of racism. In particular we must be attentive to how ordinary evil has become.

In using the word evil, it is not my intent to moralize but to make an observation about an alarming diminution in the breadth of our ethical landscape. By evil I mean what Jeffercy Burton Russell meant when he wrote that

The essence of evil is abuse of a sentient being, a being that can feel pain. It is the pain that matters. Evil is grasped by the mind immediately and immediately felt by the emotions; it is sensed as hurt deliberately inflicted. The existence of evil requires no further proof: I am; therefore I suffer evil.

In other words, evil is endemic to the human condition. Increased acknowledgment of such atrocities as the African slave trade and the Holocaust has limited our perception of evil to the large and the dramatic. These are not the only ways in which racist evil expresses itself, however. Hannah Arendt maintained that the horror of evil in the Third Reich was that it had “lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation.” Years after the publication of Eichmann in Jerusalem and the controversies that surrounded it, Arendt tried again to describe what she had found so horrifying about Adolf Eichmann:

I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous.

As citizens, we must prevent wrong-doing because the world in which we all live, wrong-doer, wrong-sufferer, and spectator, is at stake; the City has been wronged. . . . We could almost define a crime as that transgression of the law that demands punishment regardless of the one who has been wronged. . . . The law of the land permits no option because it is the community as a whole that has been violated.
but the doer... was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only noble characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as his behavior during the trial... was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but thoughtlessness.... It was this absence of thinking—which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination to stop and think—that awakened my interest. Is evildoing (the sins of omission, as well as the sins of commission) possible in default of not just “base motives”... but of any motives whatever, of any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it... not a necessary condition for evil-doing?

What Arendt saw in Eichmann is also true in our nation. This is not a country of wicked white people suffused with virulent racism. It is a nation in which people are more and more unaware of how their thought, speech, and behavior can cause others pain, and when they are told that they have caused others pain, they deny it. Many blacks want to deny the evil of black anti-Semitism. Derrick Bell writes in his essay that “even those who strongly disagree with some of his [Farrakhan’s] positions must ask whether the negatives justify total condemnation.” One suspects that if a Jew went around the country speaking of blacks as Farrakhan does of Jews, many blacks would be ready to burn down whatever city that Jew happened to speak in. One also suspects that if a Jewish law school professor sought to excuse that Jew’s racism because of other things he was saying, Professor Bell would be one of the first to say that the negatives do justify total condemnation, and he would be right.

Ultimately, we must accept that evil exists. It is something within us. It cannot be expunged because our humanity resides as much in our capacity for evil as in our capacity for good. We must make the effort to live close to our evil, to make our capacity for evil an intimate. If I keep my evil close to me, then I will not project it onto you. This is especially the responsibility of those who, by virtue of their Otherness, have suffered unjustified evil.

For blacks and Jews, this responsibility means resisting the temptation to hurt others because they have been Other. It means resisting the temptation to hurt each other because each knows how to hurt the other—better, perhaps, than anyone else. What this means for white people is more staggering. It means relinquishing the definitions of order by which they have lived. It is not possible to integrate blacks and Jews into society as it is. It is not possible because blacks and Jews can never fit the already extant definitions of the Good, the True, and especially, the Beautiful.

What remains, then, is to change the world—to find a way to remake a public order that will not have racism at its core. The essayists in the Berman collection offer essentially three answers. The first is a resurgence of liberalism, which, in the words of Michel Feher, means “transcending racial and sexual differences in the name of the universal rights of human beings.” The second is a cosmopolitanism which, again quoting Feher, “entertains curiosity about” the differences between
people. Cosmopolitanism is not “color-blind,” as liberalism would like it, or “color-bound,” as identity politics has it, but “color-curious.” “Difference . . . is a source of attraction.”

A third answer is found in the Lerner/West book, less an integral text than a series of conversational sound bites—the edited transcripts of dialogues the two have had over the last six years. Their suggestion is a “progressive politics.” For all their visibility as public intellectuals, their progressivism amounts to the hackneyed politics of late 1960s SNCC/SDS radicalism in a nineties hairdo. These conversations are short on insight and long on pomposity. Both men see themselves as building “upon the rich legacies of Martin Luther, King, Jr., and Abraham Joshua Heschel.” The book’s major flaw is not the self-aggrandizement of its authors, however, but the fact that neither West nor Lerner knows enough about the other’s history, culture, and traditions to do more than accept as true what the other offers.

Lerner says that in the ancient world, education was “the realm in which Jewish machismo [was] played out. . . . It’s not clear that, given freedom from Roman oppression, we would have chosen education as our highest value. It was a reaction to our powerlessness.” In reality, Jewish “machismo” played itself out in armed resistance to “Roman oppression,” the Romans finding the Jews more difficult to subdue than any other people in the empire. As for education, it can be argued that the root of the Jewish drive toward education is in Judaism itself, in the admonition in the Shema to “teach” one’s children the words of the Torah.

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Lerner uses Judaism to justify his radical politics. In this he is similar to fundamentalist Christians and Muslims who root their desires for radical social and political change in appeals to holiness. People who are so sure about what God wants for humanity frighten me, even if the political ends advocated would bring about paradise on earth. What Lerner represents to West as Judaism is a Judaism few Jews would recognize.

West repeatedly refers to blacks as “liberal” or “progressive,” as if this were fact. It is not. Alain Locke, the black cultural critic of the Harlem Renaissance, observed in the 1920s that blacks are conservative on all matters except race. (The contemporary black identification with the Democratic Party, increasingly tenuous, is itself a fairly recent phenomenon—manifested only since the early 1960s, when Barry Goldwater made opposition to civil rights a defining feature of the Party of Lincoln.) Opinion polls consistently reveal that the majority of blacks are far less liberal than Jews: they oppose abortion, while favoring a strong national defense and prayer in the schools. A strong conservatism undergirds even the fiery persona of Minister Farrakhan. Cornel West asserts, however, that “the core of Farrakhan is a manifestation of a Black rage articulated by a bold and fearless message vis-à-vis the white power structure.” There is no evidence that Farrakhan’s advocacy of traditional gender roles for men and women, sexual Puritanism, and entrepreneurial capitalism has caused any tremors in the support beams of the white power structure. Lerner does not know enough about black political history to recognize that West’s characterization of blacks as liberals and progressives is more wishful thinking than political reality.

These “dialogues” fail as models of black/Jewish interaction because West and Lerner do little to resolve their own differences and disagreements. This is most evident in the chapter, “Crown Heights and Farrakhan.” In June 1994, West attended the Benjamin Chavis/NAACP-sponsored National Black Summit, a gathering also attended by Louis Farrakhan. Lerner confronts West about his attendance at the summit; West’s attendance, he says, gave Farrakhan respectability and legitimacy. West denies this, insisting that he wants to be “open to dialogue with a variety of different voices.” He is even audacious enough to offer an explanation of Farrakhan’s characterization of Judaism as a “gutter religion”: “What he meant was that Judaism has been used to justify domination. He was wrong in the monolithic use of it, but we know every religion has been used to justify domination.” Farrakhan is
intelligent enough and articulate enough
to say what he means. Why does Cornel 
West feel compelled to be his interpreter?

*Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*
unintentionally demonstrates how diffi-
cult discussion between Jews and blacks
has become. Lerner and West gloss over
or ignore their differences. Because they
are political ideologues wearing the same
progressive colors, perhaps the differences
are not important. To the many blacks
and Jews who do not wear matching out-
fits, however, these conversations do not
provide any guidance on how to with-
stand differences of opinion. West and
Lerner seem to think that dialogue in and
of itself is an unmitigated virtue. But di-
alogue can as easily lead to enmity as to
comity.

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Black culture often performs a surrogate role
in American society, defining rebellion and de-
lineating the forbidden for a funk-hungry na-
ton. Just as rappers play the sex-outlaw many
white youths wish they could be, slamming
women and gays with all the bile that must
be swallowed in bourgeois society, black anti-
Semitic act out the bigotry other Americans
aren't quite willing to express. And their emer-
gence signals something about American cul-
ture as a whole.

What this is, according to Goldstein, is
the greatest use of “Jewish stereotypes”
in art since the Depression.

However, the black-Jewish conflict is
more than a turf war between minorities.
Blacks and Jews are acting out a serious
moral crisis in which the nation finds it-
self unable to agree on the nature of the
present, let alone a vision of the future.
For all the changes wrought by the sixties,
none is as telling as the loss of what Laur-
ence Thomas calls the “moral commu-
nity,” i.e., “the moral expectations . . .
people have of both themselves and oth-
ers.” The black-Jewish coalition of the
civil rights era succeeded because blacks
and Jews shared, not a common oppres-
sion, but a vision of a moral community
where equal rights before the law were
considered primary values and goals.

Blacks and Jews no longer reside in
the same moral universe. The Jewish sense
of moral community requires blacks to
condemn and reject Louis Farrakhan,
Kahlid Muhammad, and so on. The black
sense of moral community, particularly
among the young, requires the recogni-
tion of moral autonomy for black people,
up to and including choosing its own
leader. To be in possession of one’s iden-
tity means having the power to make one’s
own choices, even wrong and despicable
ones.

Blacks and Jews no longer constitute
a moral community because their prior-
ities changed. In June 1966, with the
enunciation of black power, black Amer-
ica began turning inward. In June 1967,
Israel won the Six Day War and re-
claimed the Old City of Jerusalem and
access to the Western Wall. Black nationalism and Jewish nationalism asserted themselves within twelve months of each other. Instead of occupying the same moral community, blacks and Jews became advocates for competing nationalisms.

The black-Jewish coalition was, finally, a casualty of its own success. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the legal system of racial segregation was finally dismantled. The constitutional right of blacks to the franchise was upheld and has been enforced. The black-Jewish coalition achieved its ambition. Coalitions are not intended to last forever. They are temporary alliances with specific and limited goals. A coalition is not a marriage; it is not even a relationship. It is a working arrangement in which disparate groups recognize that by coming together they can achieve certain ends none of them could achieve alone. Once those ends have been achieved, the coalition’s raison d’être is gone. The black-Jewish coalition didn’t end because it failed; it ended because it succeeded.

If blacks and Jews no longer constitute a moral community, neither does the nation itself. At least since Roe v. Wade, the nation has ceased to be a cohesive moral entity. In different ways, the assassinations of John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy and, most especially, Martin Luther King, Jr., killed the national faith that the good would always prevail. It is not too much to argue that something of the good died in all of us, alive and yet to be born, when those men were murdered. The sense of belonging to a moral community was further eroded by our loss of faith in the office of the president. Lyndon Johnson lied repeatedly about American involvement in Vietnam and had to leave office; Richard Nixon tried to cover up a burglary, lied to the American people, and left office rather than risk impeachment. The office of the presidency lost its moral authority, despite Jimmy Carter’s attempt to restore it through the force of his own sense of decency.

Moral authority and a sense of moral community have been replaced by a political-religious fundamentalism that cuts across boundaries of race, class, and religion. Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, the late Meir Kahane, and Louis Farrakhan each anticipate a day of reckoning, when the Chosen (themselves and God) will be on one side and the rest of the country on the other. Each seeks to build community around a fear and an exclusivity posturing as religious righteousness.

Since blacks and Jews arrived on these shores they have confronted a dilemma: Where do we fit? The nation itself now faces this question. Where do any of us fit anymore? Americans feel not only alienated from government but hostile to it, while at the same time wanting government to take more and more control. We have no sense of moral community any longer; we don’t even have a vision of a moral community. We are left with religious and political fundamentalisms, which offer not visions but militant nostalgia.

Ideological unanimity has become the prerequisite for disparate peoples to work together.
An answer to the nation’s identity dilemma may lie in the black-Jewish coalition of the civil rights era. That coalition worked, but not because people talked about blacks and Jews. It worked because there were concrete issues that needed resolving. Differences were sublimated in pursuit of a common cause. What blacks and Jews of that era had in common was an anger at injustice and a care that people should have an opportunity to be more than they thought they could be. More importantly, they also shared a vision of a society where the needs of individualism would be balanced by the needs of community; where community was not limited to those of one’s own race or religion, but included anyone whose vision of humanity extended beyond the immediacy of one’s personal issues.

Leon Wieseltier is correct when he writes: “The new distance between blacks and Jews may have its uses. We do not need to know each other as brothers. We need to honor each other as citizens.” Blacks and Jews will be unable to do that as long as each group demands that the other agree with them about Jesse Jack-

Michael Lerner and Cornel West.
Anthony Loew
son, Farrakhan, Israel, and so on. Ideological unanimity has become the prerequisite for disparate peoples to work together; meanwhile, the rich are richer, the poor are poorer, the cities are dirtier, and people are more and more fearful. One is tempted to ask blacks and Jews about their priorities. Do they seek moral purity, or the betterment of the quality of American life?

But blacks and Jews cannot work together because they no longer trust each other. No one trusts anybody in America anymore. We have retreated to the boundary lines of our respective clans, or the suburbs, whichever is closer. As a nation we have become afraid. At one time, blacks and Jews could have taught the nation much about what it is to be human while being afraid. Perhaps blacks and Jews can yet teach the nation that lesson—once they relearn it for themselves.