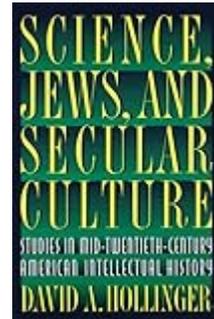




David Hollinger. *Science, Jews and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996. xi + 178 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01143-1.



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This volume brings together eight previously published essays by the Berkeley professor of history David A. Hollinger. They all bear in one way or another on science, Jews, or secular culture, usually on the interrelationships between two or more of these subjects. For example, the essay I found most interesting, “Jewish Intellectuals and the De-Christianization of American Public Culture in the Twentieth Century” (first published in 1996), studies the contribution of Jewish intellectuals to the secularisation of American culture. Hollinger demonstrates that it is the contribution of Jewish intellectuals, not a Jewish contribution, the point being that the studied intellectuals could contribute to the de-Christianization of American culture because “of their manifest failure to be Jewish parochials” (p. 19). In Hollinger’s view, American culture was traditionally a Protestant culture, with the present notion “of a pluralism in which Christianity is acknowledged to be but one of several legitimate religious persuasions” (p. 20) emerging only recently in a movement of cultural transformation in which secular Jewish intellectuals played an important role. Persons like the anthropologist Franz Boas, the biologist Jacques Loeb, the literary critic Joel Spingarn early in the century, and Felix Frankfurter, Horace M. Kallen, Morris R. Cohen and Walter Lippmann later on, contributed to the de-provincialisation of American culture—they were, in Hollinger’s words, “major agents of

cultural change” (p. 25). One important way in promoting this new identity of American culture was the making of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. into “an emblem for American life” (p. 27).[1]

The post-1933 immigration to the US allowed the entry of a large number of significant Jewish intellectuals into academia; “the fame and prestige of some of these men and women enabled this migration to have a symbolic impact far beyond the specific, local communities into which these refugee intellectuals were absorbed” (p. 28). These Jews entered academia on the basis of an appeal to universal values, thereby making religion an increasingly private matter, and at the same time making public discussion increasingly secular. Under the joint influence of liberal Protestants, ex-Protestants, religious Jews and freethinking Jews, the formerly Protestant elite institutions in the US gradually underwent a transformation into a university devoid of religious references. In our own days, Hollinger observes, the pluralist idea of American intellectual life has again come under attack on various fronts. It seems, however, that Hollinger is confident in the ultimate victory of the universalist Enlightenment which Jews were instrumental in promoting.

I particularly appreciate Hollinger’s historiographical consciousness. He is very well aware that writers on the “science and the Jews” theme all too often either cele-

brate Jewish contributions to science, or, inversely, condemn “Jewish influence” (recall the infamous notions of “Jewish science” and “Aryan science”). Hollinger calls this the “booster-bigot trap” (p. 11), but convincingly argues that it can be avoided by shunning any ethnic essentialism and by using partial perspectives (of ethno-racial minorities, of women, etc.) to correct blind spots of historical disciplines (pp. 11ff.).

Science, and specifically science as the model of universalist discourse, is another of Hollinger’s themes. Two essays are devoted to it: “The Defence of Democracy and Robert K. Merton’s Formulation of the Scientific Ethos” (1983) and “Free Enterprise and Free Inquiry: The Emergence of Laissez-Faire Communitarianism in the Ideology of Science in the United States” (1990). Both pieces bear on the history of the sociology of science. In the first, Hollinger illuminates the general cultural context in response to which Merton defined his famous “ethos of science” in 1942. He shows that in reaction to Nazism and Communism, the affinity between science and democracy was a much belabored topos. Consequently, “it becomes apparent how small were the innovations that enabled Merton to make so distinctive a contribution” (p. 91): Hollinger’s findings indeed allow one to see Merton’s sociology of science in a new light. Hollinger here covers the same ground as several of the essays of the late Joseph Ben-David[2] although Hollinger explicitly concentrates on the “extradisciplinary engagements that have helped to inspire” Merton (p. 80), his discussion could have been enriched by taking into account Ben-David’s studies of the same developments, analyzing the internal disciplinary dynamics that shaped Merton’s contribution. Contrary to so many “post-modern” scholars who think that identifying the social context of a theory (or whatever), ipso facto “deconstructs” it and deprives it of its claim to objectivity and validity, Hollinger explicitly notes that “one need not diminish in the slight-

est Merton’s contributions to sociology by discovering and analyzing the function these same ideas performed in the cultural wars of the era of World War II” (p. 80). This principled position is to be applauded. The second essay provides a cultural history of the notion of “scientific community”: the concept had been introduced already by Charles Peirce, but it entered the sociology of science only in the 1960s. Hollinger impressively shows that this is due to the transformation of science into Big Science and the correlative replacement of the notion of the autonomy of the individual scientist by that of the autonomy of the “scientific community”.. (Here, too, Ben-David offers complementary perspectives.)

Hollinger’s essays are intellectual history at its best. Each development, even if trivial in itself, is situated in a broad cultural context that endows it with general significance. Hollinger’s command of the primary sources and the ease with which he refers to general cultural developments are impressive. The book is recommended to students of the history and/or sociology of the Jews, of intellectual life in America in the twentieth century, and of science.

Notes:

[1]. Hollinger devotes to Holmes and to his Jewish connections a separate essay: “The ‘Tough-Minded’ Justice Holmes, Jewish Intellectuals, and the Making of an American Icon”; pp. 42-59.

[2]. Published in the 1970s and recently gathered by myself in the posthumously published volume: *Scientific Growth: Essays on the Social Organization and the Ethos of Science* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991)

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