

# SCIENCE, JEWS, AND SECULAR CULTURE

STUDIES IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

---

# Science, Jews, and Secular Culture

STUDIES IN MID-TWENTIETH-  
CENTURY AMERICAN  
INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

*David A. Hollinger*

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Copyright © 1996 by David A. Hollinger  
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,  
Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,  
Chichester, West Sussex

All Rights Reserved.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Hollinger, David A.  
Science, Jews, and secular culture : studies in mid-twentieth-  
century American intellectual history / David A. Hollinger.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-01143-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Jews—United States—Intellectual life. 2. Science—  
United States—History—20th century. 3. Secularism—  
United States—History—20th century. 4. United States—  
Intellectual life—20th century. 5. United States—  
Ethnic relations. I. Title.

E184.J5H646 1996

305.5'52—dc20 95-39843 CIP

This book has been composed in Baskerville

Princeton University Press books are printed  
on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines  
for permanence and durability of the Committee  
on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity  
of the Council on Library Resources

Printed in the United States of America by  
Princeton Academic Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

---

## Science, Jews, and Secular Culture

---

*To my son, Jacob, and my daughter, Julia*

## Preface

---

THIRTY YEARS AGO one of the most respected public moralists in the United States identified academic intellectuals as vital agents of the future of the nation, and of the entire modern world. Now that human beings are “emancipated and thus deprived of the guidance and support of traditional and customary authority,” the aging Walter Lippmann told readers of the *New Republic* in 1966, “there has fallen to the universities a unique, indispensable and capital function in the intellectual and spiritual life of modern society.” Cultural leadership belongs to the academy “rather than, let us say, to the churches or the government,” because behavior depends on what people believe to be “true.” And when we want the truth we now know better than to look to priests or politicians. Instead, we rely on “the universal company of scholars supported and protected and encouraged by their universities.” Lippmann, who was not himself a professor, professed to be uncertain whether the era’s men and women of learning were up to the challenge. But he did not doubt that the challenge was theirs, and that the rest of society stood to benefit from their effort to meet it.

Such sober respect for universities and their faculties has largely passed out of fashion. Lippmann’s successors among journalists are rarely idealistic about academic intellectuals. Today’s professors are not the first to be accused of bias, foolishness, triviality, political dogmatism, and unjustified hostility to religious belief, but in the 1990s these complaints have become staples of opinion-page and talk-show discussions. No doubt the failings of the professors have something to do with this change. But today’s jaundiced assessments of academia are also facets of the culture wars of our own time, which are, in turn, as rooted in contemporary politics as Lippmann’s more generous view of the professoriat was rooted in the struggles of his own generation. *A faith in the unique importance of secular inquiry to the making of a good society* had been inherited from the people who built the American universities between the Civil War and World War I, and was then renewed and expanded during the prodigious growth of American higher education that followed World War II. This faith, which Lippmann reasserted at a moment in the mid-1960s when even cautious men and women were not afraid to display hope, was felt deeply by most of the intellectuals whose strivings are the subject of this book.

*Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* invokes “Science” because so many of its cast of

characters believed that natural science set the standard for secular inquiry, and also because some of them understood science to be a vehicle for a certain cluster of liberal, democratic values they thought appropriate for American society as a whole. The title invokes “Jews” because a unique feature of the era was the demographic transformation of academic communities by immigrant Jews and their children, and because, further, many of these Jewish intellectuals were conspicuous in their devotion to science and to the building of a culture liberated from the Christian biases that barred Jews and other non-Christians from full participation in American life. “Secular Culture,” finally, marks the line between the religious cultures inherited by the bulk of the midcentury intellectuals studied here—non-Jewish as well as Jewish—and the kind of culture a number of them were concerned to expand as a common, public possession of Americans independent from private spiritual orientations. Although the title conveys the volume’s principal themes, some of this book is addressed to additional facets of the discourse of intellectuals in the midcentury decades, and to institutional and political matrices of that discourse.

The studies collected here are more of a single piece than the methodological and monographic essays I brought together more than a decade ago under the title *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985). But this new collection is, like the earlier one, made up of articles and lectures produced for separate occasions. I do not want to exaggerate the thematic unity of *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*. These inquiries are forays into domains within the recent American past that deserve the more systematic exploration I trust they will receive as historians devote more attention to this terrain. I took each inquiry in its own direction, while drawing sometimes on several of the same sources and building upon one or more of the studies I had completed earlier. This results in some overlap, which I hope will not be too distracting to a reader who proceeds directly from one essay to another.

I have corrected a few errors made known to me in the interim and I have edited down to a size appropriate for this volume one article of excessive length, but otherwise these essays remain exactly as first published. I have written a brief introduction and have prefaced each essay with a headnote indicating its chief concerns and sometimes clarifying its relation to the other studies collected here.

These pieces are of two distinct genres. One is the narrowly focused, monographic inquiry into a highly specific case: a single career (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.), a single text (an influential article by Robert K. Merton), a single event (a conference held at New York University in 1932), and a single campus (the University of Michigan). The second

genre is the wide-ranging essay sketching certain developments visible in a number of domains across several decades, and trying to assign historical significance to these developments in the larger context of United States history. Writing in this second genre, I analyze the use of science as a weapon in a sequence of cultural conflicts, trace the transition from individualist to communitarian terms for the public representation of the scientific enterprise, and explore the role of Jewish intellectuals in the process by which the cultural program of Christianity loses some of its public standing.

Parts of this book were written at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California, and at the Rockefeller Study Center in Bellagio, Italy. I am grateful for the opportunity to work under the ideal conditions provided by both of these institutions. I want also to express my appreciation for the stimulation and critical support I have received from colleagues on two splendid faculties, first at the University of Michigan and later at the University of California at Berkeley.

I want to acknowledge my debts to several individuals. It has been a pleasure to work with Diana Wear and her staff at Berkeley's Office for the History of Science and Technology, and with Emily Wilkinson and her staff at the Princeton University Press. Of the many colleagues and friends who reacted to drafts of one or more of these essays, I especially want to thank Thomas Bender for his unfailingly helpful critical advice over the course of many years. For suggestions about how best to organize these essays for presentation in a book, I am grateful to Ronald Numbers and Daniel T. Rodgers. My wife, Joan Heifetz Hollinger, has contributed to the studies collected here in more ways than I know how to adequately acknowledge.

*Berkeley, California*  
*June 1995*



# Contents

---

<i>Preface</i>	ix
CHAPTER ONE	
Introduction	3
CHAPTER TWO	
Jewish Intellectuals and the De-Christianization of American Public Culture in the Twentieth Century	17
CHAPTER THREE	
The “Tough-Minded” Justice Holmes, Jewish Intellectuals, and the Making of an American Icon	42
CHAPTER FOUR	
Two NYUs and “The Obligation of Universities to the Social Order” in the Great Depression	60
CHAPTER FIVE	
The Defense of Democracy and Robert K. Merton’s Formulation of the Scientific Ethos	80
CHAPTER SIX	
Free Enterprise and Free Inquiry: The Emergence of Laissez- Faire Communitarianism in the Ideology of Science in the United States	97
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Academic Culture at the University of Michigan, 1938–1988	121
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Science as a Weapon in <i>Kulturkämpfe</i> in the United States during and after World War II	155
<i>Index</i>	175

---

## Science, Jews, and Secular Culture



### Introduction

WHEN J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER received the Atomic Energy Commission's Fermi Award from President Lyndon Johnson at the White House in 1963, he quoted Thomas Jefferson on "the brotherly spirit of science which unites into a family all its votaries." That spirit of brotherhood, conceded the physicist in charge of the scientific team that had built the atomic bomb, may be hard to see amid the great struggle to get beyond "war as the great arbiter of history." Oppenheimer was alluding to disputes over weapons development that had raged since World War II. In the course of these quarrels, Oppenheimer's prewar associations with Communists had been maliciously invoked by opponents within the government to discredit him and even to deny him a security clearance in 1954. On the occasion of his political rehabilitation, Oppenheimer thanked the president for his "charity" and "courage" in presenting the award, and invited the assembled dignitaries to remember that science was a cultural as well as a technical presence in modern life. Science embodied an ideal of fraternity congruent with the larger hope that human beings could find means less ghastly than warfare to resolve their conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

Oppenheimer was at once a physicist, a political actor, and an agent of what he took to be the culture of science. If he was exceptional among American academic intellectuals of his generation in the extent, visibility, and volatility of his public political entanglements, his career can still serve as a reminder that the experience of academic intellectuals generally is embedded in the larger society. Yet Oppenheimer also reminds us that academic intellectuals, like other groups within the United States, engage the society on distinctive terms. Oppenheimer was a representative of an academic intelligentsia more secular, more liberal, and more Jewish than any comparable professional and cultural cohort in the United States.

The historical study of this cohort from the 1930s through the 1960s, to which this book is primarily devoted, is best advanced if we keep in mind two points that can serve as a common frame for the essays collected here. One point concerns chronology; the other, ethnoreligious demography. Many of the significant episodes in the history of academic intellectuals during Oppenheimer's generation stand somewhat apart from "the fifties" and "the sixties" as popularly invoked. Among these

episodes is the transformation of the ethnoreligious demography of American academic life by Jews, of whom Oppenheimer was one. First, to chronology, then to demography.

An understanding of the history of American academic intellectuals during the midcentury decades requires that this history be liberated from historiographic monsters that threaten to devour most of what happened culturally in the United States from World War II through the 1990s. The most formidable of these monsters is *The Sixties*, long since a singular noun denoting a series of highly visible, contentious movements and events that dominated the public life of the United States during the second half of the 1960s and the very early 1970s. Prominently at issue were the Vietnam War, the persistence of poverty and of antiblack racism, the perceived constraints of American family life, and the propriety of the political behavior exhibited by people in conflict over these issues. How should we interpret this legendary segment of modern American history? How does it figure in the more narrow history of American academic intellectuals? These are worthy questions now extensively pursued by scholars,<sup>2</sup> and by critics and politicians eager to assign *The Sixties* credit—or, more often, blame—for deconstruction, feminism, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and other enthusiasms of the final third of the century.<sup>3</sup>

One need not doubt the importance of *The Sixties* to look, in the meantime, at the part of the 1960s that came before *The Sixties*. The distinctness of this historical moment becomes more apparent with the passage of time. It is a moment etched the most vividly in popular memory by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy near the end of 1963. As it happened, the shooting took place on the very afternoon of a day the White House had begun by announcing Kennedy's decision to present the Fermi Award to Oppenheimer. Ten days later Johnson was no doubt exaggerating when he told Oppenheimer that signing the award had been "one of President Kennedy's most important acts."<sup>4</sup> But Kennedy's decision to rehabilitate Oppenheimer was at least one of a series of steps Kennedy had taken to acknowledge the value to the nation of intellectuals of many sorts, even those who had run afoul of McCarthyism. This rapprochement between the country's political leadership and its intellectuals is one reason why the early 1960s, when viewed with the history of the American academic community in mind, is a distinctive point in time. By way of sorting out *The Sixties* from the 1960s,<sup>5</sup> it is possible to list a number of long-term transformations in the circumstances and engagements of American academic intellectuals, and to note their stage of development in the early 1960s.

By the early 1960s, many Jews had quietly entered the social scientific and humanistic disciplines from which they had been almost entirely

excluded only two decades before. But affirmative action programs for women and for African Americans (then usually called “Negroes”) were yet to be developed, and the reopening of immigration that eventually fostered new attention to the status of Asian Americans and Latinos had yet to take place. Mutual suspicion between Catholics and secular intellectuals was rapidly diminishing in the wake of Vatican II and of Kennedy’s election as president in 1960, but the large-scale entry of Catholics into American intellectual life had scarcely begun. Faith in the epistemic unity of all humankind remained widespread and was still contrasted to Nazi and Stalinist theories of the racially and socioeconomically situated character of knowledge, rather than to poststructuralist critiques of “totalizing strategies.” The modernist literary canon was at the peak of its spiritual and curricular authority and had only begun to receive, at the hands of Lionel Trilling and other critics who had celebrated modernism for a generation, the skeptical scrutiny that within a few years would be turned by Paul de Man and others in postmodernist directions alien to Trilling. American democracy, imperfect as it was known to be, remained highly valued for having survived the McCarthy era and for its superiority to Soviet totalitarianism, and was yet to be tested by bitter conflicts over the issues that produced The Sixties. Indeed, the early triumphs of President Johnson’s Great Society in 1964 and 1965 reinforced a certain idealism about American institutions, and even about electoral politics, which was to be widely and vociferously scorned by 1966 and especially in the years immediately following.

The ideals of tolerance, “brotherhood,” and cosmopolitanism were more strongly entrenched in the early 1960s than they had been a generation before; they remained untouched by the multiculturalist complaint that these ideals, as interpreted throughout the midcentury decades, were too narrow, that they had served covertly to maintain in America the cultural hegemony of Europeans in general and of Anglo-Protestants in particular. Margaret Mead, Hannah Arendt, and several other women were among the most respected of American intellectuals, but the feminist theory that was to flourish in the 1970s and after was less prefigured in departments of anthropology and political science than in the journalist Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which feminists of later decades would patronize as “a fifties book.” Many academic communities prided themselves on providing a humane working atmosphere for a colleague believed to be homosexual, but the Stonewall Riot was yet to take place and what public discussion there was of gay and lesbian sexuality remained evasive when it did not speak in the categories of sin, crime, and disease. Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) caused many people to alter their conception of science, but the implications of this epochal work for the political

and cultural relations of science were still widely believed to be compatible with a host of traditional assumptions soon to be challenged by radically relativistic “Kuhnians” later disowned by Kuhn himself. Social scientists were finally enjoying a substantial measure of the prestige—and opportunities to advise governments and corporations—that seemed to come so easily to physical scientists, but these enthusiastic, confident new “policy experts” had yet to confront on a regular basis the insistent and angry charge that their claims to ideological neutrality were false and served to conceal their contributions to American imperialism. Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) was a campus best-seller, but the public LSD parties over which Kesey presided were not to begin until the fall of 1965.

Such was the status, at the instant immediately prior to The Sixties, of a number of important transformations, trajectories, and tensions. Sorting out The Sixties from the 1960s demands awareness that among the foundations for The Sixties was an honest frustration with the inability of the received wisdom to deal more effectively with deep injustices within American society and with outrageous iniquities in the conduct of the United States in the world. But another, less widely enacted phase of this sorting out is the comparable recognition that the men and women who made the early 1960s were still responding to challenges rather different from those that animated The Sixties. This could hold true even when the same people were involved: many of those who made the early 1960s were, after all, the same people who later made The Sixties.

Of this remarkable mini-era so often overshadowed by The Sixties we sometimes say, “That’s just the fifties, extended a few years.” In this view, there is a “long 1950s,” stretching from 1947 or 1948 to about 1963 or 1964, defined in part by the pre-Vietnam Cold War but characterized more decisively by something this era was not, namely, The Sixties. There is something to this idea that we can deal with the early 1960s by calling it part of the 1950s. But not much. While some of the historical importance of the early 1960s does indeed consist in the culmination of developments that gained their defining character only within the previous “long” decade, The Fifties is as overweight with meaning as The Sixties, in relation to which it has been articulated dialectically in the American popular historical imagination.

Hence the singular noun, The Fifties, has become a historiographic monster almost as distracting as The Sixties. The shadows cast by Dwight Eisenhower, tail-finned Plymouths, “consensus history,” and the *Ozzie and Harriet* show are as oversized as those cast by the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968, the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., “repressive tolerance,” and the Woodstock rock concert. The names of these two decades, even more than The Twenties and The Thirties, have become

codes for highly specific clusters of American historic phenomena, which are, in turn, commonly assigned enormous powers of determination. These mystified calendrical entities are too often incanted as substitutes for analysis. What explains this or that? Well, it was part of, or a consequence of, The Sixties. Or, The Fifties.

The chronological referents in this book are intended to be literal, not symbolic. Separating the early 1960s from The Sixties and even from The Fifties helps to situate the major themes of this volume in a chronology that was more truly theirs, frees them from extraneous associations, and makes room for more specific terms of description and analysis. The early 1960s is not the topic of this book, yet it was then that several debates and transformations addressed in this book either came to a climax or were significantly redirected. Between 1962 and 1965, for example, American scholars suddenly published a host of books and articles about science that radically reoriented learned discussion of the entire scientific enterprise. The early 1960s was also a point when the increased number of Jews on many faculties became statistically significant. But both of these developments got their momentum earlier in a history that included the 1950s while having little to do with The Fifties. And both produced legacies beyond the 1960s not limited to the contributions they made, in the meantime, to The Sixties. Several of the studies gathered here do touch upon The Fifties and The Sixties, but these two abstractions illuminate only faintly the themes in the intellectual history of the midcentury decades to which this book is addressed.

The ethnoreligious transformation of the academy by Jews—the demographic point to be discussed in this introduction—demands special attention here because it has received remarkably little systematic discussion by historians. Other basic features of the period addressed in this book, including the increased authority of science and the decline of a Protestant establishment, are staples of the historiography of modern American intellectual history. But the arrival of Jewish intellectuals within academic institutions long hostile to them has remained at the margins, even in a multiculturalist era during which sensitivity to ethnic distinctions and to the relative fate of various ethnic groups within American society has been a matter of intense public concern. In view of the fact that in many of the studies collected here I take up this ethnoreligious transformation in specific contexts, here I want to provide a sketch of this event in the round.

The specific case of Yale University instructively illustrates the experience of American higher education generally. Yale has been the subject of one of the most rigorous, scholarly treatments yet completed of academic anti-Semitism and of the pressures finally brought against it, Dan A. Oren's *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale*. There were a



scattering of Jews in the university's professional schools prior to World War II, but Oren found that within the faculty of Yale College itself—the culturally strategic core of the university—no Jew held the rank of professor until 1946. In that year the philosopher Paul Weiss was appointed, after deliberations in which Weiss's Jewishness was very much on the minds of Yale officials and of the philosophers to whom Yale turned for advice. In 1950 Weiss remained Yale College's sole Jewish professor, although by then eight other Jews held that rank in Yale University as a whole. But by 1960 the transition was visibly underway: 28 of the university's 260 professors were Jewish, including 6 out of the 95 professors in the college. A decade later the ethnoreligious demography of Yale was strikingly different. In 1970, 22 percent of the professors in the university were Jewish, as were 18 percent of the professors in the college.<sup>6</sup>

Not all major universities were as slow as Yale College to hire Jews to begin with, nor as decisively changed ethnoreligiously once the reluctance to hire Jews was overcome. But much of American higher education at the end of the 1960s looked like Yale. In a study carried out in 1969, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education concluded that while Jews accounted for only about 3 percent of the American population, the barriers to their participation in academia had collapsed so thoroughly that nearly 9 percent of the combined faculties of 303 colleges and universities surveyed were Jewish. The same study reported that when only the most highly ranked of American universities were considered, the proportion of Jewish faculty was much greater. More than 17 percent of the combined faculties of the seventeen most highly ranked universities represented themselves as Jewish. The percentage of Jewish faculty differed greatly from discipline to discipline. Jews were common in psychology and in many biomedical fields, for example, while in agriculture and physical education the Carnegie Commission found almost no Jewish faculty. In selected disciplines within the faculties of the seventeen leading universities the Carnegie study reported the following percentages of Jews: law, 36 percent; sociology, 34 percent; economics, 28 percent; and physics, 26 percent. Even in the humanities, where Jews had been the most persistently excluded, Jews were found to constitute 22 percent of historians and 20 percent of philosophers in this same group of elite universities.<sup>7</sup>

One important truth contained in these figures is that the integration of Jews into American intellectual life was a phenomenon much broader than the one phase of it to receive the most notice, the rise to prominence of the writers and critics known as "the New York intellectuals." This group is now the subject of countless monographs and memoirs. The greatest impact of the New York intellectuals was in the realm of public discourse about literature and politics. But the Jewish intellectu-