

MAURICE FISHBERG AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Mitchell Hart

Maurice Fishberg's magnum opus, *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment* (London: Walter Scott Publishing), first appeared in 1911. It has just been republished by Kessinger Publishing. Kessinger advertises itself as a company that republishes extremely rare and hard-to-find books, and then keeps them in print indefinitely. A wonderful service. But it is difficult to understand their choice of Fishberg's work. *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment* was reprinted in 1975 by Arno Press (New York), then again in 2006 by Transaction Publishers, with an introductory essay by William Helmreich. The book remains in print, hardly difficult to obtain.

What might account for the repeated republication of Fishberg's work? Assuming, of course, that the publishers believed there was some profit to be made, that an appetite and market exists for such a book, we then might query the belief in such a market. Why the continued interest, or even assumption of interest? After all, other works from the same period, treating the same or similar

topics, have been all but forgotten. In 1909, the Austrian Jewish physician and social scientist Ignaz Zollschan published a long monograph on Jews and the

question of race; the work was republished numerous times over the next few decades. True, it is in German and would thus have to be translated. But Arthur Ruppin's work, *The Jews of Today*, could

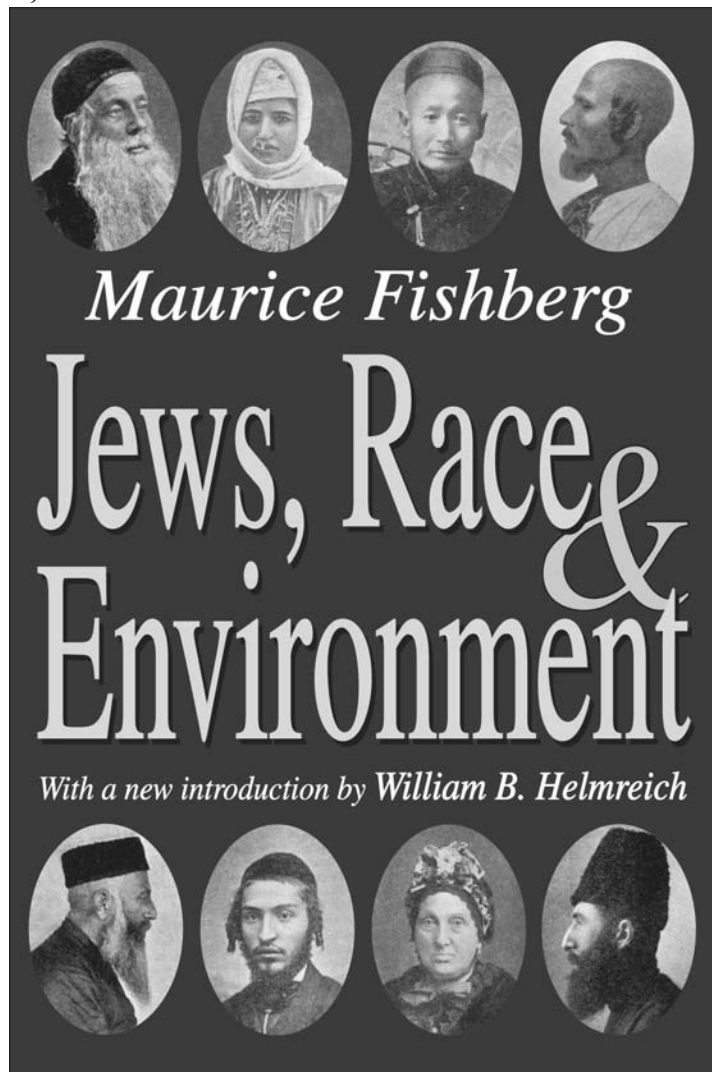
environment. Ruppin's work was originally published in German in 1904, then revised and republished in 1911; an English translation appeared in 1913. Ruppin, arguably the most important Jewish social scientist of his day in Europe, had a greater impact on people's thinking about Jews and race, and on Jewish social science more generally, than did Fishberg. Yet his seminal work has not been reissued (though this is certainly a desideratum).

Why Fishberg? I would argue that, at minimum, the answer lies in the very title of the book itself, in the ambiguity and complexity suggested by the phrase "race and environment."

The fundamental issue Fishberg implicitly raised in the title of his work remains an open question for Jews and others. What are the Jews? Are they a race? What is the relationship between biology and culture, nature and nurture, in their constitution? The immediate attraction of Fishberg's book, then, lies first in the conjunction "and" in the title: race and environment; "and" rather than "or." Fishberg certainly could have come down more decisively on one side or the other, as so many others did at the time. But he did not.

The question of Jewish identity, with regard to race and culture, biology and

environment, was never really "solved" by science; it was "solved" by politics, at least for half a century or so. It was the Holocaust, and the



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certainly lay claim to being just as important as Fishberg's for the history and development of Jewish thinking about Jews, race and

fundamental role racial thinking played in Nazi ideology and policy, that decided the issue of the Jews and race, that placed the very asking the question “Are the Jews a race?” beyond the bounds of scientific and social respectability. Nazism and the Holocaust made all but invisible a complicated intellectual and cultural past in which the Jews were not solely the objects and the ultimate victims of a racial scientific discourse but also participated in and contributed to this developing discourse. Fishberg’s work is significant, and in all likelihood fascinating, because it also reminds us of this complicated past. It takes us back to a time before the 1930s and 1940s when thinking and writing about the Jews in racialized language was thoroughly respectable, even mandatory for scientists or public intellectuals who wished to participate in the most urgent contemporary debates.

As so many, including Fishberg, wrote at the time, the Jews were especially interesting and important to the ongoing debate over race and environment because with them, or through them, one could investigate almost all of the crucial issues raised by science: collective identity and survival; racial purity; the mixing of the races and the import of endogamy and exogamy; the connection between geography, environment, and physical and intellectual characteristics; race and poverty; race and crime; race and hygiene. What is normal, what pathological? How do we account for types, for groups traits, for statistical patterns? The Jews were a favorite subject among non-Jewish and Jewish social scientists and

popular writers about race long before the Nazis, during that century or so when racial thinking was normative, at the center rather than at the margins of legitimate science and public thought.

Fishberg’s work is instructive, and also perhaps so intellectually exciting, because it also allows us to see the ambiguities or contradictions within the discourse about Jews and race at work. We can see the degree to which Fishberg, like other anthropologists, physicians, statisticians and other scholars at the time, granted the ontological status of the Jews as a “thing” to be investigated, dissected, categorized, akin to other

a racialized or biosocial being, amenable to scientific analysis.

Unlike Fishberg and others at the time, we do not assume or take for granted this ontological status of the Jews. We are as interested in, or even more interested in, the discourse—the narrative that is constructed about the Jews as a race or *Volk* or nation. But, in the end, perhaps we are still uncertain about the status of the Jews. “*Was sind die Juden?*” as one German anthropologist wrote at the end of the nineteenth century. “What are the Jews?” Not “Who is a Jew,” either according to Jewish law or popular culture, but “What are the Jews” anthropologically. This was, in the end, the intellectual impulse to Fishberg’s research (the political or ideological impulse, on the other hand, was assimilationism, the desire to demonstrate scientifically that the Jews could and

would integrate into European and American societies, and the concomitant desire to refute the Zionist claims that such a goal was impossible).

How racial is Fishberg’s narrative? His overarching point is that the Jews are not a pure race, and that whatever particular or peculiar physical and intellectual traits scientists can identify as “Jewish” owe far more to history, environment, and culture than to heredity. But can Fishberg really be called an anti- or nonracist? Not really, at least not in this work (in the 1930s he would join with his friend Franz Boas to spearhead an anti-racist campaign aimed at the idea of Aryan supremacy). But in 1911 Fishberg is still asking questions that preoccupy

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groups, but also akin to plants and animals. Again, like so many others, Fishberg participated in the naturalization or materialization of the Jews; their past, their bodies and minds, their present-day conditions were to be understood as the product of natural forces—the natural selection process set forth by Darwin, the sociological and economic conditions analyzed by social scientists, and/or the bioracial mechanisms of heredity delineated by racial scientists. Thus, when we read Fishberg we can see, in one of its fullest forms, the variety of approaches taken by science to grasp the Jew as a natural being. Fishberg’s book offers us a wonderful example of the construction of the racial discourse about the Jews, the way in which science works to make the Jew into

anthropologists, demographers, physicians, and others who take race very seriously as a key to understanding groups, including the Jews. Thus, Fishberg insists in the preface to the book that there is no need for him to defend bringing out such a book, given that “the whole world is interested in the subject of the Jews as a race, and the getting into closer touch with the ethnic relations of the Jews.”

In his narrative he is often more ambiguous and ambivalent about race. One example: In his first chapter on demography, Fishberg discusses the widespread theory that the Jews enjoy a heightened ability to acclimate to dramatically different climates, and that this ability is in fact a racial trait, a result of “Semitic blood.” Fishberg rejects the notion of Semitic blood; but he does not reject the argument that the Jews enjoy this ability to acclimate, nor does he fully reject the idea that race helps us understand this. If the Jews “do

prosper in tropical as well as in cold climates, it is probably more due to the racial elements which they have acquired in the countries of their present sojourn than to the ‘Semitic’ blood which is alleged to flow in their veins.”

Are most Jews any more certain these days about the nature of Jewish identity, about the relationship between genetics and culture—even if most would not employ the term “race”? There is enough uncertainty about the answer to this question, given the ongoing research into DNA profiling, genomes, genetic diseases, markers of genetic identity, that we might comfortably assume that a majority of Jews (not to mention non-Jews) remain unclear (and confused) about where biology ends and culture begins when it comes to Jewish identity. Race *and* environment, not race or environment. Fishberg, in the end, went back and forth, unable to decide incontrovertibly on one

explanation or another. And neither can we, at least not without the help of ideology or the history of the Holocaust. Thus, politics might dictate the answer “Jews are not a race,” because to assert the opposite is to invite another catastrophe in the name of social, racial, or eugenic purity. Science, though, has still not finished working out the relationship between biology, history, and culture. Thus, for many Jews, and probably even more non-Jews, the answer to the question “What are the Jews?” is not at all obvious and certainly not simple. That, perhaps, is what makes Fishberg’s work still important, fascinating, and even relevant almost a century after its initial publication.

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