Introduction: What Is the Hollywood Question?

GABLER'S PARADOX

The end of an era in American history has brought a remarkable degree of cultural ferment, no doubt the result of large-scale shifts taking place in national and international affairs. One finds this ferment imbuing discussions of both internal domestic affairs and the nation's role in a shifting global order. In 1990, Germany completed its reunification as the Soviet Union crumbled. Amid the biggest bank failures and bailouts in United States history, American conservatives cast this successive chain of international events as a victory for Western capitalism over communism. With the purported fall of communism, however, American political discourse lost one of its most potent, influential images. The specter of communism – the so-called Red Menace that had haunted American popular consciousness since World War I and that had structured the virtual entirety of United States post–World War II foreign policy – was suddenly gone. The very raison d'être for blacklisting, national security, "police actions," missile crises, Vietnam, arms races, and nuclear holocausts had seemingly crumbled into powdery oblivion.

As one demon corroded from public consciousness, others quickly took shape. Iraq moved its troops across the Kuwaiti border in the summer of 1990, triggering a series of events that helped redefine post–Cold War American foreign policy in terms of ready access to the world's petroleum resources. Meanwhile, Operation Desert Storm coincided with what Evan Carton has dubbed Operation Campus Storm. As a still undisclosed body count continued to rise in Iraq, American popular culture fretted over didactic campus leftists. That Campus Storm in fact had no name is significant. Instead, it gave a name to what it fought: political correctness, or PC for short. Concealing its own form of correctness, it thus made attacks upon diversity, affirmative action, and curricular reform seem "normal," perhaps even a bit modish.[1]

New paradigms such as multiculturalism – deemed the penultimate ex-
ample of campus correctness by its opponents – emerged in stark contrast
to earlier pluralist models celebrating America as a cohesive "melting pot."
Multiculturalism argued, among other things, for a critical re-visioning of
the canon and other accepted bodies of work. Part of this project involved
the privileging of voices that had spoken heretofore from the margins. Not
surprisingly, when some of those voices from the margins gained a chance
to speak, they failed to hew along consensus lines. In fall 1990, a *New York
Times* feature by author Neal Gabler detailed recent publicized tensions
between blacks and Jews. "Jews, Blacks and Trouble in Hollywood" re-
counts how various high-profile figures within the black community had
charged Hollywood with "Jewish racism." Gabler brought his own unique
perspective to this controversy. His 1988 book, *An Empire of Their Own:
How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, had told a compelling, bittersweet story
of Jewish success in America. Well-received by the popular press, the book
shows how American Jews, marginalized by Protestant America, found
solace "within the studios and on the screen," where they could fashion
their own influential vision of what America meant to them.[2]

The thesis that a special symbiosis emerged out of the relationship
between immigrant Jews and Hollywood success retained an especially high
degree of relevance to eighties-era shifts in American demonology. Holly-
wood Jews, Gabler argued, were neither the subversive Communists nor the
greedy capitalists that had appeared in so much anti-Semitica of yore.
Indeed, with the alleged triumph of the free market over Communism, such
images appeared somewhat anachronistic. Instead, Hollywood Jews were
semitragic figures, immigrants who desperately yearned for acceptance from
the very culture that ultimately rejected them but accepted their vision of
America. As the Berlin Wall crumbled, the image of the Jew that had once
embodied both Communist threat and capitalist maleficence now appeared
as a bittersweet harbinger of the American Dream. The semitragedy, semi-
comedy of Jewish assimilation also remained especially compatible with
debates over political correctness. Appearing in a Sunday *New York Times*
section whose feature story decried America's "new tribalism," Gabler's
article renders the deterioration of black–Jewish relations as evidence of yet
another tear in a culture placing too much stock in cultural difference.
Such emphasis had borne the fruit of racial discord. In this particularly
emblematic case, one minority was not only begrudging the success of
another one, but also invoking invidious stereotypes in doing so.

A curious contradiction emerges from these observations of racial dis-

cord. According to an old story, expertly refurbished by Gabler, Jews had acted as Jews in "inventing" an empire of their own and in the process helped fashion a twentieth-century American national identity. Nevertheless, when the empire left blacks "virtually unrepresented in the top echelons of production," Gabler argues that Jews had acted no differently than Gentiles – namely, other whites. Why did Jews act as Jews in one instance, but no differently than whites in the other? How could one excoriate Legrand Clegg for black anti-Semitism when at a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People convention he observed that "Jewish racism in Hollywood" kept blacks from decision-making positions? In discussing Hollywood, how did notions of Jewish "invention" achieve acceptance while accusations of Jewish "racism" met with opprobrium?[3]

These parallel commentaries, so powerfully divergent yet feeding into the same deeply felt tributaries of racial, religious, and ethnic identities, hint at something larger and deeper than just a debate over the connotation of "Jewish Hollywood." At least two profound fears have threaded their way through American history: fear of the Other and fear of potentate. Stereotypes of Jews could accommodate both.

A fundamental set of tensions has historically pitted white Protestants against a host of Others. In 1845, Congregationalist minister John L. Sullivan coined the term "Manifest Destiny" in his *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. The term describes the natural and eventual process in which whites would "overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."[4] As a sexual and immoral savage, the Jew remained closer to Others who might threaten the taming of the wild frontier. Manifest Destiny often depicted a struggle between the civilizing forces of Western superiority and the violent, savage threat of the wild man – even if this concept could justify genocide, slavery, and large-scale displacement of indigenous peoples.

The stereotyped Jew could also embody the threat of assimilation. Unable to curb his voracious appetite and lust for power, the Jew allegedly channeled his savage impulses toward the socially acceptable. Ultimately a counterfeit, the assimilated Jew supposedly hollowed out the core of civilized society as the unruly hordes threatened to storm its gates. Racism directed toward blacks and Native Americans has traditionally located nonwhites outside the walls, displacing the actual brutality and violence meted out to these groups as an imagined, projected savagery of an uncivilized Other. American anti-Semitism, however, conjured a different kind of projection. Recalling the myth of the Trojan Horse, traditional anti-

Semitism envisioned the Jew inside the walls, abusing the rules of assimi-
lation to amass greater power and special privileges, much to the detriment
of communal welfare.

In an era of relative prosperity and enlightenment, one might easily lose
perspective on the historical manifestation of anti-Semitism. On the one
hand, anti-Semitism did not have the same economic and political ramifi-
cations embodied by the racism of Manifest Destiny and its structuring gaze
toward various perceived Others. Yet, this racism of Manifest Destiny did
not have the same *moral* ramifications that anti-Semitism had. Before
World War I, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite – that is to say, its
churches, schools, government, banks, and virtually every major business
concern – considered the United States to be not only Anglo-Saxon but
Christian as well. Immigration threatened this vision of America, but it did
not automatically threaten control over these institutions by the Protestant
elite. Indeed, these institutions created barriers – both explicit and implicit
– keeping immigrants at the margins of employment and culture.

Imposition of such barriers, however, presumed a static culture – some-
thing America was decidedly not. Jews – and later, Catholics – found easy
access to marginal culture, and the cultural margins were quickly migrating
toward the center of popularity. Once a novelty, motion pictures emerged
at the rising crest of a new mass – not marginal – culture. When the shift
caught Protestant elites by surprise, most rearticulated a Manifest Destiny–
like prognostication. Having lost control of the American small town to
the invading marauders of mass immigrant-Jewish counterculture, Protes-
tant elites hoped to refashion America into the vision of the small town
these elites saw themselves as once having controlled. When the Catholic
church flexed its audience muscle in the 1930s, ultimately wedging its way
into the moviemaking process, Protestants had clearly lost both their
chance and their clout.

If Manifest Destiny could maintain outsider status for Jews, even as the
rise of mass culture could bring this marginal status into the center of the
mainstream, overt hatred of Jews did not necessarily receive a warm wel-
come in America. A hatred as old as it was international, overt anti-
Semitism emigrated from the foreign lands, a product of immigrant igno-
rance. Anti-Semitism was one thing shared by all nations and cultures, but
in a land where any uncolored person deserved a fresh start and a fair
chance, such shared bonds were not necessarily welcome. For these hatreds
and prejudices, America served more as a series of land mines than as a
melting pot.

What separates blacks from Jews – at least, in terms of skirting land

mines – is that Jews have a powerful narrative that speaks on their behalf. According to this narrative, Eastern European Jewish immigrants built the film industry in the first decade of this century and dominated it by the second. As the industry grew and attracted others to its ranks, Jews "favored their own." The Jewish movie moguls proceeded to craft a particular vision of America. That this vision reflected "a powerful wish fulfillment that idealized America and sanctified its values" is not entirely incompatible with the complaints of various black leaders. Indeed, an idealized America for many Americans has meant the relative invisibility of black roles and experience upon the screen. One might even argue that if the only roles accessible to blacks are maids, buffoons, and shiftless darkies, these stereotypes could reflect a certain set of values fulfilling the vision of this idealized America.[5]

Of course, the anti-Semitic charge of Jewish control is nothing new. Protestant reformers advocating federal censorship of the movies had begun to enunciate the charge shortly after World War I. Throughout the 1930s, the charge electrified the formation of such pressure groups as the Catholic Legion of Decency and, in the early 1940s, the isolationist America First. More recently, the Reverend Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association wrote to Sidney J. Sheinberg, president of MCA/Universal. In protesting the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Wildmon asked Sheinberg, "How many Christians are in the top positions of MCA/Universal?" Dolly Parton explained her unsuccessful bid to launch a TV series about a country star turned gospel singer as having to face "people [in Hollywood who] are Jewish. And it's a frightening thing for them to promote Christianity." William Cash, correspondent to the conservative British magazine *The Spectator*, used *An Empire of Their Own* in 1994 to characterize a "Jewish cabal" behind the "21st Century Entertainment Superhighway." Moreover, in April 1996, Marlon Brando blamed a Rodney King–style beating of Mexican migrant workers administered by the Riverside Police Department on cinematic stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood Jews.[6]

There is a reason why stories of ethnic invention and maleficence could say essentially the same thing yet come to such radically different conclusions. Accusations of Jewish control *over* Hollywood (anti-Semitic or otherwise) and philo-Semitic explanations of a Jewish presence and contribution *in* Hollywood are in fact part of the same discussion. The "discussion," of course, has remained protracted, frustrating, at cross-purposes, difficult, obtuse, ill informed, and disjointed. The discussion has privileged some voices but not others. Nonetheless, the discussion has taken place. It has

taken place, not in an interpersonal sense, but in a mediated one, through the country's newspapers, magazines, nonfiction, popular and marginal fiction, children's literature, pamphlets, broadsheets, and cartoons. The discussion has taken place through the stories, characters, and images that emerged from Hollywood films. But the discussion remains just as present in what did not emerge from these films: the censored stories, the rewritten characters, the haggling and negotiating between film personnel, studio administration, and the Production Code Administration (PCA), Hollywood's own self-censorship cum marketing arm extraordinaire. The discussion has taken place in letters from the PCA files, in memos between production personnel, and in veiled and not so veiled congressional testimony. Neal Gabler, William Cash, Legrand Clegg, and Spike Lee continue a discussion that began a long time ago, but the discussion infrequently calls attention to the fact that there *is* a discussion. However lopsided, the discussion is as much an exchange *between* speakers as it is a catechism *for* an audience, working out deeply held assumptions about race, ethnicity, power, mass media, modernity, and national identity.

The above-named sources used in this book represent more than a meticulous or idiosyncratic history. They evidence the extent to which the discussion has operated within the liminal and sometimes not so liminal spaces of culture. The discussion has heretofore gone unnamed, and like charges of political correctness, it accumulates its power to structure popular consciousness from its anonymity. Yet, unlike charges of political correctness, which arguably emanated from a handful of well-funded conservative think tanks during the early 1990s, this discussion over Jews and Hollywood is much older, more profound and has greater implications for the way in which society interrogates ethnicity, race, mass media, even itself. Competing voices have struggled within the terms of its discussion to attain dominance. Importantly, the struggle over who gets to explain ethnic instrumentality has spoken to a distinct set of concerns for a modernizing, urbanizing, heterogeneous America. Having taken place for most of the twentieth century, the discussion served as a bulwark of provincial American values against the more liberal, cosmopolitan values of urban ethnics. It has provided commentary – both positive and negative – on the American Dream myth through its emphasis upon the meteoric rise of immigrant Jews. It has appropriated antitrust rhetoric to express concerns over the workings of capitalism. It has attacked New Deal liberalism by conflating it with communism. In addition, it augured the downfall of isolationism, whose proponents tried and failed to capitalize upon this debate by using it

to attack the increasing power and presence of the United States in world affairs. And now, approximately fifty years after its last great appearance on the eve of the United States's entry into World War II, a renewed articulation has once again proven its resilience by manifesting itself in other discussions concerning black–Jewish relations, Mexican immigrants, and the information superhighway.

THE HOLLYWOOD QUESTION

While both powerful and resonant, this discussion possesses an ephemeral quality as well. Like accusations of political correctness, allegations of Jewish control operate most effectively unnamed, in the background with their attendant assumptions implicit. In order to talk about this discussion, then, one must talk about something that in its most effective state and under normal circumstances one should not see. Understanding this discussion, as opposed to giving it added momentum, not only means foregrounding it. Understanding this discussion means taking a different perspective from the ones normally taken in this ongoing conversation, talking *about* the discussion rather than talking *within* or *through* it. Moving this discussion from background to foreground also means making its attendant assumptions explicit. All of these activities require taking a certain perspective. To understand this powerful, resonant, and yet ephemeral discussion, this perspective seeks neither to embrace nor to denounce the discussion, but to engage critically with it.

Consider an analogy initially proposed by the newspaper of automobile magnate Henry Ford, who – as Chapter 3 shows – built a publishing empire based on his allegation of Jewish control. A 1921 editorial from Ford's *Dearborn Independent* expresses longing for the ability to map out a "community mind." Such mapping would "trace the impressions of American people, American habits and American standards which those mind-groups hold."[7] This yearning to plot American consciousness appears somewhat naïve. However, the statement's operative metaphor – a map – seems rather prescient. Maps, after all, represent physical space in a way that helps to make sense of the world. The *Dearborn Independent* editorial desires to map out cultural space so that it can make sense of perceived cultural shifts taking place in American intellect and morality. Yet the editorial's obsession with both Jewish control as well as mind-effect is itself significant. From a historical perspective, by tracing this obsession one can learn much about a phenomenon that has suffused American cultural history. Thus,

while much scholarship has demonized the *Dearborn Independent*'s anti-Semitism, one can use these editorials to chart out a certain cultural topography.

Rather than chart out American mind groups as *The Dearborn Independent* proposes, then, I am proposing that recorded allegations of Jewish control themselves require mapping as significant reference points within American culture and ideology. These allegations do not map out an American mind per se – few statements have such power and rarely are minds so cohesive or gullible. Nevertheless, these allegations do help chart the larger set of rules, beliefs, and guidelines that for over a hundred years have structured American cultural thought and lived experience. Just as the geographic map depicts the space within which people reside – as opposed to depicting the people who reside within space – so the cultural map shows allegations of Jewish control over Hollywood in a particular manner. This map does not try to show what people thought per se, but rather the cultural space within which such thought took place. The sources listed above – the memos, letters, fiction, nonfiction, testimony, and the like – remain vital because their statements occupy cultural space in a significant way. These sources and the statements they embody, like the features depicted on a map, offer tangible evidence to help make sense of a cultural landscape. Thus the term "The Hollywood Question" describes not so much a way of thinking as the landscape, structured by a key set of historical and discursive features, within which such thought takes place.

Calling this debate the Hollywood Question refers to an earlier, better-known discursive landmark: the Jewish Question. Achieving its currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Jewish Question really articulated a problem: given their cultural and religious difference, should Jews enjoy the same basic rights as everyone else? For example, should Jews have the right to own land and vote? In making this emphasis, the Jewish Question (also, significantly, called the Jewish Problem) invokes a whole set of assumptions. The Hollywood Question built upon this already predetermined set of answers to structure its own deep-seated assumptions concerning Jewishness, mass media, audiences, and America.

In the United States, the Jewish Question operated within a distinctly American context. German Jews had emigrated to the United States mostly in the 1830s following a period of political turmoil and repression in their native country. Relatively small in number, German Jewish immigrants remained indistinct from other Germans who arrived in this country. By the end of the century, large waves of Russian Jews were arriving. Markedly different in appearance and demeanor from their Russian counterparts,

German Jews had already been assimilated into American culture. Russian Jewish immigration, however, belonged to a general increase in immigration to this country. New populations transported traditional cultural values. Truly international, anti-Semitism was one of the few cultural similarities that could bind together disparate groups.

These assumptions construct a particular version of what it means to be Jewish. Like most attempts to construct ethnicity, the Question cum Problem has very little to do with ethnicity itself. As Stephen Jay Gould has shown, the whole concept of race remained founded upon totally arbitrary distinctions. Defined by nineteenth-century white Anglo scientists who manipulated their experiments, race science found what it presumed: that one could determine the mental inferiority of other people through a certain set of perceived physical characteristics. Not surprisingly, these scientists ranked Jews above blacks but below "white" whites in intelligence. To these men, Jews looked similar to whites although Jews maintained a culturally distinct identity. Science ascribed this difference to racial inferiority.[8]

The people the scientists deemed racially inferior, of course, had very little say in the matter. In this way, science could construct race in a way that maintained certain power relations. This scientific perspective – a perspective that constructed its "objectivity" along a highly subjective set of criteria – included nothing of the subjectivity of the people it racialized. The scientific perspective did not consider the diversity and complexity of what being Jewish meant. It did not consider Jewish identity from the perspective of the Jew. It did not consider Judaism's long and rich cultural heritage. It flattened Jewishness into something simply different – superior to other nonwhite "races" but inferior to the white one. In some ways, this flattening treated Jews no differently than it treated blacks, Asians, or Southern Europeans. The very act of grouping, naming, and calling by race was an act that maintained power. Science, making whiteness invisible and thus a position of power and authority, could naturalize the cultural and economic forces that had privileged its own voice and perspective, while quelling the voice and perspective of those it presumed to study.

The Hollywood Question simply updates the Jewish Question and its attendant set of assumptions. Instead of overtly asking whether Jews can participate in the regular affairs of daily life, the Hollywood Question asks whether Jews, given their quasi-racialized difference, should participate in the regular affairs of mediated life. The Question does not attempt to understand the complex, contradictory relationship between ethnicity and social identity. Rather, it constructs Jewishness for Jews. Like its antecedent

tradition, the Hollywood Question is concerned with how Jews see them-
selves as Jews only insofar as its racialized perspective explains the impact
and influence Jews have had on American culture. Jews, both questions
presume, perennially act *as Jews*. Yet this construction can never explain
who a Jew is, or what being Jewish means. Jews just are. Whatever a Jew is,
the assumption goes, a Jew will always behave like a Jew. Ethnicity serves
as one of many motivating factors for Jews – as well as for anyone else.
Obsessive attempts to locate ethnicity as the driving force behind individ-
ual action fail to distinguish the important role that *talk* about ethnicity
has in constructing ethnic identity.

Obviously, there were people who identified themselves as Jews and who
worked in Hollywood. Unfortunately, there is no easy or accurate way to
account for who these people were. In his 1941 treatise on American anti-
Semitism, Donald S. Strong went through the eighty thousand names listed
in Poor's *Register of Directors*. After finding that only 4.7 percent had what
appeared to be Jewish names, Strong argued that any omission of Jews with
"names common to other peoples" would be offset "by the inclusion of
non-Jews with 'Jewish-sounding' names."[9] Since the task of determining
who could be identified as a Jew is nearly impossible, consider untangling –
at least for the time being – the discourse on Jewish control and Jewish
participation from the phenomena of Jewish participation in Hollywood
and American life. In other words, this project asks that the reader contem-
plate the Hollywood Question as a phenomenon in its own right, not just
a phenomenon justified by what it seeks to find.

To make this separation affords a new set of possibilities for understand-
ing the tremendous impact that the Hollywood Question has had on Amer-
ican culture. One can, for example, heed Robert Sklar's observation that
focusing upon *who* controlled the movies was probably far less daunting
than attempting to understand the awesome power of the movies them-
selves. Rather than arguing that the Question was a function of the number
of Jews in Hollywood, Sklar suggests that elusive explanations of something
as powerful as media influence generated a kind of anthropomorphism. This
study seeks to move away from the anthropomorphism that Robert Sklar
recounts. It does not even seek to counter such notions with alternative
explanations of media power. Rather, this study argues that discussions
concerning film and the power of this medium could generate their own
kind of authority.

In reframing and "mapping out" the discussion concerning Jews and
Hollywood that has already taken place, I do not mean to squelch debate.
To the contrary, the influence of ethnicity at both individual and collective