

Jerry Gershenhorn. Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. Illustration, notes, bibliography, pp. xvii, 338.

Racial assumptions that were commonly held in the past are hard to fathom today. In America during the twenties racism was not only prominent, it was respectable. Today we live in a transformed world, where African American scholars dominate Black studies, and when a new spirit of political correctness controls the rhetoric in the centers of power. On June 13, 2005 the U.S. Senate passed Resolution 39, "apologizing to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation." The resolution was long overdue, but it was unanimous. Jerry Gershenhorn who teaches history at North Carolina Central University has written an intellectual biography of an anthropologist who was at the center of this discursive revolution in the racial politics of knowledge. He is best known for *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), a book that after 65 years is still in print and is being used as a textbook in Black colleges today.

This is remarkable considering that nothing ages faster than anthropological assumptions, particularly those of dead white males. Herskovits was born in Ohio, of an assimilated central European Jewish family, studied at the New School and received a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Columbia. His personal experience of anti-semitism and his education in a progressive setting stabilized an anti-racist and anti-colonial habit of the heart which inspires his entire work. Yet, like his mentor Franz Boas at Columbia Melville Herskovits was driven by two progressive, but contradictory desires: The quest for citizenship on the one hand and a yearning for community on the other, which pulled his attempts at theory formation in opposite directions. Both Boas and Herskovits fought the ruling orthodoxy of his day, the "Nordic nonsense" of Aryan superiority over lesser races, that was based on a "pretentious pile of pseudoscience" as Boas put it. To combat the evolutionary and developmental paradigms contained therein they rolled out enlightenment universalism. On the grounds that all human cultures were identical, both called for assimilation to the American political and social order. Such assimilationist rhetoric was part of the progressive struggle for economic opportunity and political participation spearheaded by the NAACP. Full citizenship was the goal. Harlem, so argued Herskovits in his essay for the anthology *The New Negro* (1925), was just another 'American neighbourhood.' Africa, he claimed, had been burned away by slavery, an argument that E. Franklin Frazier, Carter Woodson and the Marxist international including Richard Wright would readily endorse. Cultural differences should be chalked up to class or nurture, not race. This integrationist desire dovetailed with his reform Judaism and his own quest for an American citizenship.

Yet, as a budding Jewish scholar Herskovits had to work within the grant giving institutions of the twenties. This was the heyday of anti-immigration politics and eugenics (the DNA of its day) with public leaders such as Madison Grant who stabilized racist sentiments in the social sciences. The ordering of races according to their unchanging biological qualities was the order of the day. Hence the National Research Council (NRC) was mainly interested in physical anthropology, i.e. anthropometrics of African Americans. Whether they liked it or not scientists had to find funding in this racist setting. Boas had already done a study of head shapes of first and second generation Italians. According to his "evidence" Italians had changed in one generation due to the American environment: Therefore nurture instead of nature was the cause of difference proving a "plasticity of physical features in the presence of acculturative forces." (Yelvington, 3)

In the same manner Herskovits now hoped to refute the theory of negro inferiority by measuring nose height, nose width, nose depth of Blacks in Washington, and by concluding that the mixture and variation within negro population was the same as that among whites. The anthropometric proof was published in *The American Negro. A Study in Racial Crossing* (1928). While his evidence may not have convinced racist social scientists such as Madison Grant, W.E.B. Dubois

was full of praise. Carter Woodson remained sceptical owing to the epistemological quandary. By endorsing a physiological method, he argued, Herskovits was stabilizing a racist sciences, albeit in order to achieve anti-racist results.

While employing these racist means for the sake of universalist ends both Boas and Herskovits were also attracted to a Romantic valorization of cultural and ethnic uniqueness. Thus they argued for a pluralistic tolerance of such difference, a theory commonly labelled cultural relativism. Indeed Herskovits came to believe over time that cultural difference could be so deep-seated that it was hard to alter by social engineering. (All his life Herskovits polemicized against applied anthropology, an implied criticism of British social anthropology which stood in the service of the colonial administration.) Again both were motivated by a progressive interest. This time it was the hope to recognize the uniqueness of and create "pride" in African culture and to activate the interest of African Americans in their own history. What is Africa to me, Countee Cullen had plaintively inquired of his Harlem audience. What was the value of identifying with Africa at this time in history? Arthur Schomburg's reply in 1925 convinced Herskovits: "The Negro has been a man without history because he had been considered a man without a worthy culture." (The New Negro, 231-7). Culture and history stood in a symbiotic relationship. Change had a structural aspect. This introduced a theoretical focus on "culture areas" and on the question of cultural exchange and "survivals." Moreover, however questionable anthropometry may have been it suggested that the combination of nurture and intermarriage in the New World had led to a new racial type. Here the idea of creolization emerged *avant la lettre*. But the question remained where had this New Negro in the New World come from. Elsie Clewes Parsons, whose family had made a fortune with Wedgewood franchise in the 18th century, provided the funds for Herskovits to find out. He went to Suriname to study a maroon diaspora and experienced a massive conversion to cultural particularism.

Erich von Hornbostel was the first to alert him as early as 1925 that "motor behaviour" might be one such African survival that sticks. Indeed, Herskovits found proof in his assistant Zora Neale Hurston who, although light-colored, was walking and talking evidence of African behavior. His findings in Suriname, later in Haiti, Trinidad, Bahia and on the West Coast of Africa, particularly in Dahomey convinced him of the profound cultural impact of Africa on the America. "What has Africa Given America?" he trumpeted in 1935 overturning his previous assumption that Africa had been "burned away" by slavery. In stressing the African survivals in black culture Herskovits stood virtually alone among white social scientists at this time. For the prevailing orthodoxy held that blacks had no culture to guard and to protect, and that their "deviant" cultural behavior was a consequence of social pathology. The Carnegie Corporation had begun a research study aimed at undoing the social barriers that stood in the way of advancement and chose Gunnar Myrdal, an established Swedish sociologist to direct it. Herskovits was asked to write one of the initial studies to guide Myrdal.

This effort turned into *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Herskovits had hopes that his passionate plea for the recognition of Africanisms would "reduce" racism. Many colleagues including blacks thought otherwise. Again Dubois liked his book, but Alain Locke, Gunnar Myrdal and E. Franklin Frazier chided the dogmatic obsession with African survivals as a political dead end and warned that such affirmation of Africanisms would be grist for the segregationist mill. Even Ruth Benedict argued from the universalist side of the Boas legacy - understandably so at the high time of Nazi particularism. Indeed for a good twenty years the Herskovits thesis lay dormant, only to be revived by the Black Cultural Nationalism of the sixties and by a renewed interest in the Harlem Renaissance and its search for a black aesthetic. Gershenhorn's account is particularly strong in presenting Herskovits as a builder of institutions of African American and African Studies: He put Northwestern on the map as the Center for African Studies. He was involved in the national African Studies Association, in anti-colonial politics and attended the First International Congress of

Africanists in Ghana. He has gone down in history as the builder of interdisciplinary, multinational and transnational scientific networks (with a clear sense of American power in the agenda setting). But he had a contentious relationship with leading contemporary African American scholars such as W.E. B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier and Carter Woodson. He undermined their efforts to create an Encyclopedia of the Negro, a task left to Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Appiah to complete. All his life he preached the gospel of scholarly objectivity and he criticized DuBois and Woodson for sacrificing scholarly objectivity to racial advocacy. At the same time he took political positions himself and, constantly patrolling the boundaries of New World Negro studies, practiced a furious nepotism when it came to placing his cronies in positions of power, always of course under the guise of scientific objectivity. In short, Herskovits mastered the high art of academic agenda setting by using a combination of situational expediency and clear political goals or ideological parameters. Nonetheless, within the racialized setting in which he had to work his bravery in racial politics far outshines his failings as a colleague.

Gershenhorn has produced a full account of Herskovits' life and work on the basis of unpublished letters, an account which is both entertaining and readable. Yet the book remains weak in the area that seems to this reader Herskovits' most important legacy: His central role in the dynamic history of anthropological theory formation. Little is said to clarify the Boasian background in Kulturkreislehre which emerged from the Virchow/Bastian circle in Berlin, with interesting colonial sub-plots involving Felix von Luschan that John David Smith has recently uncovered. It would have helped to hear how this theoretical implant in America contrasted with the domestic evolution group around Lewis Henry Morgan. Herskovits was caught and torn between these traditions. Walter Jackson's article in *History of Anthropology* (1986) does a better job in unravelling these contradictions. Finally the book does not deal in a satisfactory manner with the current conundrums and aporias of a politics of difference, e.g. Walter Ben Michaels objections to "antiracial culturalism" as yet another form of disguising racism, because it requires a commitment to racial identity. The Herskovits tradition in the racial politics of knowledge was carried on by Sidney Mintz, Richard and Sally Price, Dell Hymes, John Szwed, Norman Whitten and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. Our current discourses and battles of interpretation would be unthinkable without Herskovits' critical inspiration. While this study abounds in factual details, it is too modest and regrettably ignores this rich lode in the history of anthropological thought.

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Nathan Glazer. "Out of Africa." *The New Republic* (2/14 2005) 32-35

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