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Introduction

It is bad to arrive too quickly at the one or the many. — Plato, *Philebus*

WE BEGIN the new century like we began the last, debating the proper approach toward social and political concerns relating to race and culture. Yet the terms and the nature of the debate have changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, race and culture were generally framed in hierarchical terms, with white Anglo-Saxon Protestants at the top of the developmental scale. In the United States, as in much of the rest of the world, white men held powerful political and social sway; African Americans, in particular, were subjugated politically, economically, and socially. Abroad, Africans and Asians suffered similarly under Western imperialism. Those who were nonwhite, non-Western, or female had little voice in global politics or in the academy. According to mainstream scholars, African culture was nonexistent, and black American culture was merely a distorted version of Anglo-American culture.

Today, much has changed. Nationalist movements vanquished Western colonialism in Africa and Asia. In the United States, social movements for civil rights and women's liberation overturned legally sanctioned racial and gender inequities. Scholars now generally reject the notion of a social hierarchy based on race, gender, or culture. Indeed, African, African American, and women's studies have emerged as respectable academic subjects. These far-reaching changes, however, have sparked a new global discourse on race and culture that is fraught with controversy. In the United States, many of today's political debates are anchored in culture; political battles and elections are often won or lost on the basis of cultural questions. Many liberals argue for a national acceptance and celebration of cultural diversity, a notion that includes

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gender, sexual orientation, phenotype, and religion, along with race and ethnicity. Advocates of cultural diversity in education and politics have popularized the term “multiculturalism” in support of their goals. In this political climate, many social and cultural groups that long suffered from discrimination now emphasize their group identity to make political and social gains. Women, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, in particular, have asserted their political identities, emphasized the significance of cultural heterogeneity, and analyzed the harm caused by past sociopolitical hierarchies.¹

Although these strategies have yielded important gains in the United States — affirmative action policies, civil rights legislation, black studies programs, women’s studies programs — some liberals and many conservatives have criticized what they term “identity politics” for creating social divisiveness and intolerance toward opposing views.² For example, liberal sociologist Todd Gitlin has argued that identity politics has so fragmented American society that it has limited our capacity to make a unified attack on poverty and economic inequality throughout the world.³ On the other side, many conservatives and religious fundamentalists have attacked identity politics as part of their larger battle against the “immorality” of popular culture. In this battle they have decried affirmative action, feminism, and reproductive rights; demonized homosexuals; attacked immigration policies; and blamed poverty and crime on the “immoral” lifestyles of the poor. Meanwhile, conservatives such as social critic Dinesh D’Souza argue that identity politics has led to intolerance for opposing views and an irrational stifling of free speech.⁴ Finally, conservatives attack multiculturalism “and its demonic twin, ‘political correctness,’” as stand-ins for their distaste for liberals’ emphasis on minorities’ rights.⁵

Paralleling this American debate on identity politics is an international debate on the relative merits of cultural particularism and universalism. As cultural and ethnic groups in the United States have fought for a greater voice in politics and society, so have formerly disenfranchised countries sought to assert their identities in international politics. This has led to contentious debates about specific cultural rights versus universal human rights. For example, in the decades since the 1947 adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), newly independent states in Africa and Asia have challenged the document’s generality. They have argued that the UDHR was created with

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limited non-Western input and that it is ethnocentric. Critics find untenable the notion of defining human rights universally, across all cultures. If cultures create their own values and all cultures are worthy of respect, how can a single set of human rights be defined and applied?⁶ Thus contemporary arguments about race and culture have been often polarized between those who see cultural politics as destroying common values and goals and those who see it as safeguarding minority group interests from the tyranny of the majority.

During the past century many men and women have helped transform the debates on race and culture from acceptance of racial hierarchy and imperialism to controversy about identity politics and cultural relativism. In the early to mid-twentieth century, however, one man in particular not only challenged the racial and cultural norms of his day but also envisioned the multiculturalism that was to emerge in the last decades of the century. From the 1920s to the 1960s American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits confronted questions about race and culture in innovative and groundbreaking ways. Born into a world of racial and cultural hierarchy, of white supremacy in America and European imperialism in Asia and Africa, Herskovits promulgated the principle that all cultures deserve respect. In 1948 he asserted that twentieth-century anthropologists had made two outstanding contributions to the understanding of the human condition. They had “ceaselessly combatted the concept of racial superiority” and had “documented the essential dignity of all human cultures.”⁷ He could just as easily have made this statement about himself, for his work as an anthropologist and a social critic undermined hierarchical ways of thinking about humanity and underscored the value of human diversity.

This book is an intellectual biography of Herskovits; it is also a study of the intersection of his work with racial politics. As Sidney Mintz has pointed out, “Science aspires to stand outside the subjective wishes, biases, and blind spots of society itself. . . . But what gets studied, when, and how, are matters that cannot escape the social, economic, and political climate in which decisions about the place and goals of science are made.”⁸ When Herskovits entered academia in the early 1920s, white men dominated the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Black studies and African studies were virtually nonexistent. Herskovits helped move African American studies and African studies into the academic mainstream. He supported black and white scholars who sought to

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undertake research on black history and cultures in Africa and the Americas. At Northwestern University, he established anthropology courses on African cultures and African American cultures (construed broadly as the cultures of peoples of African descent throughout the Americas), and he studied black cultures by focusing on blacks as the subjects, rather than the objects, of history. Indeed, his focus on the cultures of peoples of African descent in Africa and the Americas presaged the more recent conceptualization of the African diaspora. Herskovits's efforts joined him with the few black colleges and black scholars who were making efforts to study African Americans and to place blacks at the center of study.⁹

Herskovits sought to undermine racial and cultural hierarchy throughout his career. In his earliest work on the physical anthropology of American blacks—in the midst of 1920s modernist attacks on Victorian thought—he challenged the Victorians' understanding of race as a biological concept. Using anthropometry, the tool that racist scholars had used to support the notion of a racial hierarchy, Herskovits refuted the dogma of race as an unchanging category, fixed in nature. In *The American Negro* (1928), Herskovits demonstrated that most American blacks had both African and European ancestry, but contrary to expectations, they exhibited very similar physical characteristics. This finding disproved the interpretation of traditional racial theorists, who assumed that the physical traits of individuals in mixed racial groups would be marked by great differences based on the definition of a race as a people with similar physical characteristics and a common racial ancestry. Herskovits's finding that a mixed-race group was physically homogeneous rendered the biological definition of race untenable. Indeed, Herskovits maintained that American blacks, by virtue of their mixed heritage, were not really a race at all but a mixed population group. Further, he demonstrated the fallacy of the racist view that mulattoes could not reproduce. Consequently, Herskovits challenged the biological definition of race and helped steer scholars toward a more modern conception of race as a sociological category. By doing so, he undercut the notion that race determined behavior. Instead, he substituted environment and culture for race as the explanation for behavioral and intellectual differences between individuals. In this way he attacked racial hierarchy and demonstrated the falsity of intellectual rankings based on race.

Herskovits spent the middle part of his career marshalling evidence to demonstrate the richness and complexity of African and African Ameri-

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can cultures and the influence of African culture in the Americas. His field trips to Suriname, Dahomey, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil convinced him of the important manifestations of African culture in the Americas, which he, like many other liberal scholars, had initially rejected due to an assimilationist bias. In his ethnographies and in his magnum opus, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits challenged those who maligned black culture and African culture, including black and white liberal scholars who argued that black American culture was a pathological version of white culture with little or no African influence. The contrasting positions taken by Herskovits and his critics brought into sharp relief the debate over the nature of black culture. At a time when most white Americans assumed black Americans to be inferior as a race and a culture, Herskovits's establishment of the strength and complexity of African and African-influenced cultures was a great intellectual achievement.¹⁰

Prominent liberal scholars, black and white, rejected Herskovits's conclusions about black American culture because they disavowed the existence of a distinctive black American culture. Moreover, they rejected Herskovits's argument that recognition of the complexity and strength of ancestral African cultures would ameliorate race prejudice against African Americans. Instead, they maintained that by providing evidence of differences between black and white culture, Herskovits was furnishing support for those who would justify segregation of the races on the basis that blacks were incapable of assimilating into mainstream American culture.¹¹ Herskovits countered this position by insisting that black assimilation into American culture and preservation of the African heritage were not mutually exclusive. Nor was acculturation a one-way street. Just as blacks had been influenced by white American culture, so had black culture, with its African-influenced cultural traits, contributed to white American culture. Herskovits maintained that African Americans were just "like other folk in their ability to assimilate what is new to them and to give of their aboriginal endowments to those with whom they have come into contact."¹²

During these years Herskovits convinced anthropologists to accept acculturation studies as a vital part of the discipline, pushing anthropological study beyond its traditional focus on isolated, nonliterate societies. He laid the foundation for a dynamic view of cultural change that emphasized cultural diversity and cultural pluralism. At the same time, by providing evidence of the diverse influences on American culture, Herskovits helped transform notions of American identity from exclu-

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sive and unitary (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) to inclusive and pluralist. Herskovits's cultural relativism — the belief that cultures could not be ranked in a developmental hierarchy — underpinned his leadership in acculturation studies and thrust him into the middle of a philosophical debate among intellectuals. As an anthropologist and public intellectual, Herskovits argued for mutual respect among cultures and attacked ethnocentric evaluations of cultures.

After the Second World War Herskovits's expertise and interest in the expansion of African studies made him a key force in the development of African studies programs. American involvement in the Second World War and the Cold War induced policymakers to call for the creation of area studies programs to provide experts so that the United States could implement policies to serve its global interests. In this context, Herskovits established the first major interdisciplinary African studies program in America in 1948. In 1957 he played a pivotal role in the founding of the African Studies Association and served as its first president. Herskovits's support for African studies helped ensure that Africa would become a legitimate area of academic study.

In his later years Herskovits moved to the political stage to argue for a voice for Africans in their own, and the world's, affairs. The combination of Herskovits's own views and the requirements of the Second World War, which broke down the barriers between government and social science, propelled him into the role of social critic. As the foremost Africanist in the country, he felt compelled to eschew his previous stand against activist scholarship. He entered foreign policy debates as a strong critic of America's Africa policy and an advocate of African self-determination. Herskovits lobbied the U.S. government to support the independence of Africa and help bring an end to white supremacy regimes on the continent. In 1947 he wrote the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Human Rights that was submitted to the United Nations, advising against an ethnocentric formulation of human rights. He sought to safeguard developing nations by ensuring that a statement of human rights based on Western values would not be imposed upon them.

Although he benefited from the rise of African studies, Herskovits criticized the Cold War assumptions on which that development was based. He challenged the Cold War paradigm by advising policymakers to reject considering African countries as merely objects in the Soviet-American battle for global hegemony. As a policy analyst and impresario of African studies, Herskovits stressed the necessity for African self-determination

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and decolonization. But American policymakers generally rejected Herskovits's advice to deal with Africa on its own terms. They formulated policy with Africa based on the assumption that the continent was a Cold War battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union and refused to include Africans in the decision-making process. According to Herskovits, a collaborative process between Americans and Africans would advance U.S.-African relations, serve America's foreign policy interests, and improve life in Africa. In ignoring Herskovits's advice, American policymakers undermined African political and economic development. Herskovits's contributions to black studies, African studies, and modern notions of cultural pluralism made him a key figure in twentieth-century intellectual discourse.

Several scholars have made valuable contributions to the Herskovits story. In 1973 the anthropologist George E. Simpson published a brief biography with selected articles by Herskovits. Simpson's book emphasized Herskovits's contributions to anthropological study: his seminal work in African and New World Negro anthropology and his research in economic and physical anthropology, ethnopsychology, anthropological theory, and folklore.¹³ Simpson, however, did not attempt to place Herskovits's work in its larger historical context.

In 1994 folklorist Robert Baron wrote "Africa in the Americas: Melville J. Herskovits' Folkloristic and Anthropological Scholarship, 1923–1941," the first dissertation on Herskovits. Baron sought to alter the view of Herskovits as obsessed with a search for African survivals in black American cultures. Instead, he emphasized Herskovits's views on the dynamism of culture, on its responsiveness to internal and external influences. In an in-depth analysis of Herskovits's fieldwork and writings, Baron traced the development of Herskovits's ideas about acculturation from the early 1920s to his 1941 publication of *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Baron argued that Herskovits was interested in diverse influences on African American cultures, in addition to the creativity of black peoples in adapting their cultures to these influences. Baron viewed folklore as the centerpiece of Herskovits's work on African diaspora cultures. He maintained that Herskovits reconciled particularism and universalism by focusing attention on the unique characteristics of African American cultures while recognizing that blacks assimilated aspects of mainstream American culture when given the opportunity to do so.¹⁴

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Walter Jackson, who has written the most extensive historical account of Herskovits's pre-World War II writings, highlighted Herskovits's cultural particularism in his research on black cultures in the Americas. Jackson chronicled Herskovits's change from an assimilationist perspective on black culture to a pluralist view that emphasized the influence of African cultures. Based on extensive research into Herskovits's papers and publications, Jackson traced Herskovits's career from the 1920s to the 1940s in the context of contemporary debates among anthropologists about method and purpose. Jackson argued that Herskovits's interpretation of black cultures was grounded in his ethnographic research, his ethnic identity, the influence of Harlem Renaissance writers, and the influence of his mentor, Franz Boas.¹⁵

Historians Kenneth Janken and Robert L. Harris Jr. have criticized Herskovits's institutional role in the development of black studies. They reproved Herskovits for his failure to help "integrate African-American scholars into the mainstream" during his tenure as chair of the American Council of Learned Societies' Committee on Negro Studies. They argued that Herskovits limited black participation so that he could sidetrack a proposal to challenge racial discrimination against black scholars in academia and in the use of historical archives.¹⁶

Despite these valuable works, they do not add up to a fully integrated story. Past scholarship has focused on Herskovits's role as a champion of African survivals in black culture, a contributor to anthropological and folkloristic methodology, a trailblazer in African studies, or a paternalist who marginalized blacks in academia. Historians and anthropologists have concentrated on Herskovits's pre-World War II research, emphasizing his search for evidence of African culture in the Americas and the summation of that work in *The Myth of the Negro Past*. A number of anthropologists have stressed Herskovits's contributions to anthropology and folklore. By contrast, little has been written about Herskovits's post-World War II promotion of African studies and his critique of American policy toward Africa during the Cold War. Because scholars have limited themselves to examining portions or aspects of Herskovits's work, we have only a partial understanding of his impact on racial and cultural discourse.

This book is the first attempt by a historian to comprehend Herskovits's entire professional career, from his graduate study at Columbia University in the early 1920s to his death in 1963. It is intended to fill the

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gap in scholarship on Herskovits by examining his entire intellectual career from a historical perspective. Based on extensive research in the Herskovits papers, Herskovits's publications, and related manuscript collections and writings, I argue that Herskovits's work on Africans and African Americans is inextricably connected by his embrace of cultural relativism, his attack on racial and cultural hierarchy, and his conceptualization of Negro studies, which he defined as the study of peoples of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, Herskovits's work during his early and late career was designed to accord dignity to all cultures; he maintained that marginalized peoples were worthy of study in higher education and consideration in politics.

Herskovits's work was marked by tension as he shaped and was shaped by the context in which he worked. He sought to liberate contemporary scholarship from outmoded ways of thinking as he tried to liberate himself from traditional views and methodologies. In his early physical anthropology study of American blacks, he sought to undermine the use of race as a biological concept, but he never completely rejected its use in biological terms. In fact, he inadvertently reinforced the race concept by continuing to employ physical measurements in his research.

Herskovits's institutional role in the development of black studies was also characterized by tension. As an anthropologist coming of age during the 1920s, Herskovits sought to employ the authority of scientific objectivity and detached scholarship to counter pseudoscientific racism and advance black studies by empowering the subjects of his research — black people — as creators of their own culture. Thus, while he championed the view that an objective scholar must eschew social activism in one's scholarship, Herskovits's own work was designed to correct previous scholarship that upheld racial and cultural hierarchy and to underscore the need for tolerance of all cultures. Although this objectivist stance served his cause well at the time, it later placed him in a conservative role, especially when he gained influence with the philanthropic foundations that played a large part in financing social science research. During the 1930s and 1940s, as an adviser to the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Rockefeller Foundation, Herskovits's strict advocacy of detached scholarship served to sidetrack important efforts to help African American scholars surmount racial discrimination in academia. At times, he also used his power with the

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foundations to try to stop black colleges and scholars from undertaking research in areas of mutual interest. Although Herskovits often supported the work of black scholars, like Ralph Bunche and Johnnetta B. Cole, he criticized certain activist black scholars—notably Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois—who he considered propagandists rather than scientists because of their social-reform orientations. By consistently promoting the benefits of detached scholarship without regard to social-reform goals, Herskovits denied the political nature of scholarly inquiry. Indeed, he failed to admit that his own egalitarian values and assumptions influenced his work. Thus his institutional impact on the development of black studies was mixed. While he generally acted to include black studies, black scholars, and black students in the mainstream of academia, at times he hindered progress toward that goal.

The tension in all of Herskovits's work is largely derived from the way he tried to balance universalism and particularism. In his dependence on scientific inquiry to help him subvert the effects of racism on cultural anthropology, he embraced objective scholarship as a universal truth. In his fieldwork, however, Herskovits upheld a particularistic perspective evidenced by his pluralist view of culture. His beliefs in egalitarianism and cultural relativism convinced him to reject racial hierarchies, to oppose the notion of universal values, and to argue that no outsider could objectively evaluate another culture. Throughout his career Herskovits assumed a challenging and tension-inducing position that sought to combine a belief in science as a unifying force for humanity with a pluralist conception of culture.

In 1993 Johnnetta B. Cole, former president of Spelman College in Atlanta, recalled the liberating feelings inspired by her first reading of Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* forty years earlier. Cole, a graduate student in anthropology under Herskovits during the 1950s and 1960s, explained that the book “affirmed how terribly human” was the African American experience.¹⁷ She remembered “gasping with shock and joy over what I learned there. . . . [F]orty years ago such thinking [on the African cultural influence in America] was revolutionary—and even heretical.”¹⁸ In fact, much of Herskovits's work was revolutionary. Through his research, writing, and teaching, he dignified the lives and struggles of peoples of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic.