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The Power of »Whiteness«. Comment on James Barrett/ David Roediger

»No one was white before he/she came to America,« declared James Baldwin, an eminent African-American novelist and essayist. In this provocative vein he continued his 1984 essay with the observation that »It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country.« Baldwin's declaration was undoubtedly as startling for blacks as to any stray white readers who might have chanced upon *Essence*, the black periodical in which it was published.¹ The essence of Baldwin's precocious insight was not simply that race – of whites as surely as of blacks – was a social and historical construction, but rather that the rationale for and the process of that construction involved »the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying Black subjugation.«

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One could take James Barrett and David Roediger's essay as an effort to elaborate Baldwin's theme historically, to explore the development of racial self-consciousness as well as racist attitudes towards others that characterized new American immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though hardly innocent of racial ideas in their countries of origins, most of these immigrants were ignorant of »conventional U.S. [racial] attitudes upon their arrival,« the authors assert. It did not take long, however, before they became thoroughly »Americanized.« By that self-same process, moreover, they were also racialized as »white«. Indeed, the process of becoming American was concurrent and interpolated with the process of becoming white; race and nation were thoroughly and mutually imbricated. Explicating this doubled process – becoming white and imbibing American racial ideology – forms the primary object of Barrett and Roediger's essay. Or, put more broadly, their goal is to ground the social construction of race in everyday experience, to show just how race was made.

Race-making, they argue, was structured by the social power of discourse, the action of the state, the dynamics of class formation, and what they call the self-activity of the immigrants themselves. Each of these worked differently and sometimes even at cross-purposes. Building on the premises of Roediger's earlier works, the authors probe the social meanings embedded in ordinary discourse and imagery, where whiteness is invoked to draw physical, intellectual, and moral distinctions that embody everyday, taken-for-granted notions of a racial essence. There are »white men's jobs« and »nigger work,« »white men's wages« and »cheap labor,« and so forth. Embedded in this language is a world-view that ascribes status, assigns place, and invokes with the spoken word a presumed inner essence of the other. Thus »the heathen Chinnee,« docilely content with a rice diet, would work for a pittance. Black workers, seeing little reason for solidarity with white strikers and seeking entry to industrial occupations normally denied them, inadvertently supplied a verb-phrase to denote scabbing – »turning nigger.«

The new immigrants who poured into America from the 1880s until immigration restrictions were imposed in 1924 were not immune to such invidious characterizations themselves. »Hunkies« defined the lower rungs of an industrial labor force from which – before 1915 – African Americans and Mexicans were largely excluded. Italians – dubbed »the Chinese of Europe« – filled the places that, rhetorically and sometimes literally, had been occupied by the recently excluded Chinese immigrants. Meanwhile, both Chinese and Italian laborers were im-

1 James Baldwin, On Being »White« ... And Other Lies, in: *Essence* (1984).

ported to southern plantations as a counterweight to and control over the African American labor force traditionally employed there. It is in that sense, then, that Southern and Eastern European immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – much like the Irish of the early 19th century – were not fully »white,« or at least »not-yet white.« The stereotypes appended to their bodies reflected material conditions and power relations. Words, whether deployed against or by the immigrants, located them within the American social terrain and upon its social hierarchy.

This essay must also be read, however, against the background of a raging debate among left-leaning American academics about the validity or even value of so-called »whiteness studies.«² Inspired in large part by David Roediger's 1991 publication, *Wages of Whiteness*, recent students of race in America have begun to interrogate the idea of whiteness, focusing greater attention on the heretofore *unmarked* racial identities of white people and exploring how that concept forms a necessary prerequisite to the racial belief system that underpins racism.³ Moreover, following Roediger, most of these studies posit that ordinary people, and most particularly the white working class, were active agents in the racial formation of whites and blacks – on shop floors, in union halls, and on minstrel stages. The essential collective contribution of this work, therefore, has been to destabilize the stubborn asymmetry of racial thinking; it is not just blacks, browns, and yellow people who are racialized, white is also a racial ascription that has a history and begs explanation. And while this must be true wherever hierarchical racial differences are articulated, it is especially so in the self-consciously multi-ethnic habitus of the Americas.

In the fierce tones and burnt-earth style that only fellow-leftist seem capable of mounting, however, the whole notion of »whiteness« has come under withering attack. Many labor historians, in particular, are uncomfortable with having the fundamental categories of their inquiry recast. Whiteness, they argue, is a nebulous and suspect concept and the notion of new immigrants »becoming white« is historically inaccurate. »Whiteness« is a moving target, Eric Arnesen complains, its use inconsistent and diverse, »variously, a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for »white supremacy,« an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial »Others« and oneself that can be rejected through »treason« to a racial category.« Arnesen's attack is enthusiastically seconded by historian Barbara J. Fields, who thinks the notion of »racialization is the rotten plank« in the effort to explain the construction of whiteness, and political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr., who is suspicious of the politics lurking behind the »whiteness« trope.⁴ What seems most to enrage the whiteness critics, however, is the empty faddishness with which the term has sometimes been taken up, like some new intellectual

2 For a representative selection of these critics, see contributors to a special issue: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001) 1, p. 3–32, especially Eric Arnesen, Barbara J. Fields, and Adolph Reed, Jr.

3 A somewhat random selection of examples of such studies, all published in a single year, are: Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color. European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Cambridge 1998; Georg Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness. How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Philadelphia 1998; Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness. The Culture of Segregation in the South*, New York 1998. Note these studies are quite diverse in purpose and methodology; what unities them is mainly their interrogation of whiteness.

4 Eric Arnesen, *Whiteness and the Historian*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001) 1, p.9; Barbara J. Fields, *Whiteness, Racism, and Identity*, in: *Ibid.*, p. 50; Adolph Reed Jr., *Response to Eric Arnesen*, in: *Ibid.*, p. 69.

grail, that remains ever elusive and the subject of mystical invocations. »Whiteness« was not a language the new immigrant workers would have used or worried much about, they argue, and in any case they were already »white on arrival.«⁵

Notwithstanding the annoying faddishness and vagueness with which »whiteness« is sometimes invoked, which surely gives a measure of justification for these critics' impatience, there truly seems to be more heat than light in all this. The nebulous or inconsistent quality of the whiteness concept is in part attributable at least as much to the contingencies of its historical as its contemporary usage. As is so often the case with concepts of this sort, some of their power derives precisely from the difficulty in actually pinning them down and demystifying them. Surely »race« itself is one such concept, but not many of us would seriously entertain the notion that we can dispense with it as a category of social analysis. And as Baldwin saw so clearly, even if the historical actors did not use the term »whiteness,« it is clear that they were in the process of embracing its conceptual essence, its vague content sketched against the foil of black caricature. And, finally, it is true that these new immigrants were *legally* white: unlike Asians they were eligible for citizenship, unlike blacks they were able to vote. Immigrant men and women, moreover, faced no significant taboos regarding whom they might marry or where they might live. But to deny the process of racial formation in this way is to privilege legal and state-centered forces over all others, for it is equally true, as Barrett and Roediger argue, that there were marked discontinuities between their legal and cultural status. I would add that these discontinuities were shared with other racialized groups: Mexican Americans who were »white« in the census but not in the public accommodations of central Texas; or contemporary African Americans who are now equal before the law even in the eyes of the most right-wing ideologue but not in the job market.⁶

In any event, although the essay under discussion has been included among the targets of the anti-whiteness fusillade, most of their criticisms surely miss the mark. Barrett and Roediger set out »to test the notion of whiteness in concrete situations with an eye to the material and structural as well as the cultural and subjective.«⁷ Indeed, it could be argued that their analysis of »the economics of inbetween-ness,« rather than being some new-flangled cultural studies trope, draws instead on an older notion advanced by economists that there is a split labor market in which a racial hierarchy in the allocation of jobs is the principal means of labor control. The value added here is their discursive analysis showing how certain jobs also become identified with certain nationalities, ethnicities, and race. Drawing on their analysis, in turn, we might conclude that »whiteness« and »blackness« are reified in one's everyday experience, in one's field of vision, in the sociability of one's workday, and in one's pocket on payday. And this is not just true for white working-class immigrants, but for us all.

5 As the title and general argument of Thomas A. Guglielmo's, *White On Arrival. Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago 1890–1945*, New York 2003, suggests, even though the actual analysis is much more nuanced than that.

6 On the complicated and contradictory racial identification of Mexican Americans, see Neil Foley, *Partly Colored or Other White. Mexican Americans and Their Problem with the Color Line*, in: Stephanie Cole/ Alison M. Parker (eds.), *Beyond Black & White. Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest*, College Station/ Texas 2004. For anomalies in the contemporary status of African Americans, see Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge 2000.

7 As described by James Barrett in his rejoinder to Eric Arnesen, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001) 1, p. 36.

Barrett and Roediger succeed, therefore, in showing us how the idea of whiteness as a relevant social identification evolved while, as Baldwin intuited, submerging competing national identifications and cultural allegiances, like religion. They do not succeed — as they readily concede — in de-centering the profoundly male-oriented analysis of their predecessors. By focusing on the actions of and within the state, within unions, within workplaces, and about citizenship, they exclude women's spaces, neighborhoods, churches, and processes like racial mixture. We are told, for example, that Catholicism facilitated cross-ethnic marriages and that this further confirmed white solidarity, but notably this did not work for Catholic Mexicans.⁸ Surely if women's experiences are neglected, such analyses will not only be incomplete but lack robustness as well.

It is also likely that the history of white racial formation will become more complicated as one moves deeper into the 20th century and beyond. For example, Barrett and Roediger argue that immigration restriction was »in large measure a triumph of *racism* against new immigrants,« and with that act Congress reaffirmed their »inbetween-ness.« True enough, but if one follows the administrative application of that law, it becomes clear that the »whiteness« of those of Southern and Eastern European descent who were already resident was actually strengthened, as anxieties about additional immigration was relieved and the state's focus shifted to colored immigrants from the Americas, who were not covered by the law, and to Asians, who were then still considered unassimilable.⁹

Whatever criticism of detail one might make of this article, as well as others exploring the phenomenon of whiteness, it is well to remember that there *is* a problem of racial formation and racial consciousness in America that remains to be explained. And we need coherent ways for thinking about them because they have bedeviled not just historical analysis but on-the-ground social mobilizations throughout most of America's history. »White« is not simply an un-interrogated given in the social analysis of academics. Many times in our nation's history people seeking a language of identification in the political and cultural multiplicity of America have slipped silently into that space, one that has so often proven to have a mysterious political efficacy. In America, sadly, its manifestations are as real as the last presidential election.

8 On the general phenomenon, see John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries. The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, Chicago 1996. The intermarriage rate for Mexican Americans is much lower than for other Catholic immigrants, as well as other Latinos, see G. Reginald Daniel, *More Than Black? Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order*, Philadelphia 2002, p. 100.

9 See Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects. Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Princeton 2004.