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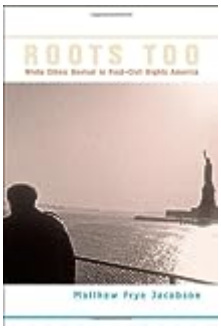

Matthew Frye Jacobson. *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. 483 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01898-3.

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(Not) White Like Me

"Hey, don't blame me. My grandparents immigrated from Italy. My family was not even here during slave times, and they certainly never owned slaves." Anyone who looks at issues of race and racism in the United States has heard some variation of these words. Many of us have probably used them. And yet any denial of white privilege for Americans of European immigrant stock founders pretty quickly on the rocks of the reality of America's shores. One of the privileges of immigration was the privilege of becoming white, of moving from an ethnic identity to an American identity, and more to the point, to a white American identity. Thus from housing options to educational opportunities, from job availability to racial profiling, most Americans whose grandparents immigrated from such countries as Italy, Ireland, Germany or Poland have benefited explicitly from their whiteness and the privileges that inhered to it.

To be sure, the immigrant experience in the United States was not always an easy one, and the path to whiteness was fraught with discrimination, bigotry, want, and otherness. But this path became recognizable enough that it has a name, "Hansen's Law," which Matthew Frye Jacobson explains in his exciting, provocative, challenging, and vitally important new book, *Roots Too*. Marcus Lee Hansen, a son of Swedish-born parents, argued that the second generation of immigrants, the sons and daughters of those who immigrated to America, wanted to assimilate, to forget everything of the old country of their parents' birth, and become fully immersed in the new. But the third generation, the grandchildren, would then strive to remember and revive what their parents had tried so hard to forget.

Jacobson uses Hansen's Law as a springboard to his discussion of the revival of post-World War II white ethnic identity in the United States, a revival that, not coincidentally, arose concomitantly with the civil rights movement. His subjects are these grandchildren (and the generations that followed). He finds the ethnic identity movement most evident in what he identifies as a neoconservative (in a potentially problematical usage of the word) backlash against both the Civil Rights Movement and some of its outcroppings, such as affirmative action and the post-Great Society welfare state. But he also identifies the revival of ethnic identity in liberal multicul-

turalism; second-wave feminism; pop culture, especially the movies and television; and literature, as well as across the American landscape.

Jacobson begins with a long exploration of the origins of the roots movement, which can trace much of its genesis to the black freedom struggle that provided both inspiration–the movement set the template for the identity emergence that followed–and, just as importantly, it presented something against which certain factions of reactionary conservatism could stand. Thus much of the roots revival is at its essence a backlash against civil rights. In the same chapter Jacobson begins the long process of debunking of the myth of "Ellis Island Whiteness," the creation myth of the white ethnic movement in which the porthole through which millions of American immigrants passed became both sanctified and homogenized historical memory, a process that is one of the themes of the book as a whole (p. 7, passim). Jacobson's chapters tend to be long and discursive, oftentimes meandering in several directions before coming back to their most salient points. These diversions are almost always worth the trip, but may well befuddle and confuse general readers and undergraduates.

From this diffuse and challenging beginning, Jacobson narrows his focus. Chapter 2, "Golden Door, Golden Screen," provides a fascinating exploration of the manifestation of the roots identity in movies and on television, a trend that reached its apogee in the 1970s. Jacobson sees two distinct strands of the emerging ethnic flavor of films, all of which fit in the category of "the iconography of immigration." The first involves an affirmative, inclusive immersion of ethnicity in movies and on television that in many ways represents a corrective to previous imbalances in the demographic makeup on screen. But there is also a darker trend at work in the form of what Jacobson calls a "cinema of white grievance," another manifestation of the backlash against civil rights, in which blacks appear rarely and when they do, their presence is problematic.

This latter category sometimes causes Jacobson to overreach, such as in his treatment of Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* movies (1976-1990), which he posits represent, at heart, "ethnoracial battle[s]" (p. 101). Undoubtedly ethnicity plays a role in the world Rocky Balboa, "The Italian Stallion," inhabits, but what is that role? Balboa fights the brash, Muhammad Ali-esque Apollo Creed. So an obvious conclusion, which Jacobson reaches, might be that the racial subtext is vital. At the same time, for a white filmmaker such as Stallone to make (and star in) a film such as *Rocky* and to demand an element of realism in the context of the 1970s, surely choosing a black opponent was not of necessity a racial decision. Indeed, it would have been more problematic for Rocky to have waged his epic struggle against another white fighter in a decade in which boxing's heavyweight division was at its peak with fighters such as Joe Frazier (who makes a cameo in *Rocky*), George Foreman, and Muhammad Ali. Had Rocky not fought a black fighter Jacobson still would have been able to cast the film within the realm of his "cinema of grievance." So yes, race, and Rocky's Italian heritage, are important factors in the *Rocky* movies. How divisive that racial aspect is, however, remains debatable, and one might argue that the early *Rocky* movies belong in the category of films about ethnic incorporation as opposed to those depicting racial grievance.

Jacobson also finds literature to be fertile terrain for exploring the ethnic revival. One's response to chapter 3, "Old World Bound," will be largely dependent upon one's receptiveness to literary criticism. Jacobson makes many salient observations about dozens of books that represent the "ethnic revival in American literature," which he dates to 1960 (p. 130). Jacobson's strength in this chapter is in revealing the ambivalence inherent in the assimilationist narrative that so many putatively celebrated. Many of the most trenchant authors (Jacobson focuses on Jewish literature primarily though not exclusively to make his conclusions) challenge the unalloyed virtues of assimilation and depict generations of ethnics who are unmoored, not fully welcome in the new world, but too far distant from the old to stake much of a claim to it. In this literature the diaspora had proven to be a dual-edged sword for most of its descendents. Jacobson's range is impressive, though as with much literary interpretation there is an element of showiness to it all, a sense of intellectual muscle-flexing through an interpretive apparatus that relies on the reader buying Jacobson's conclusions. This is the case with all scholarship, but most historical arguments carry with them an evidentiary burden of proof that literary critics elide.

In the next two chapters, "The Immigrants Bootstraps, and Other Fables," and "I Take Back My Name," Jacobson returns to his densely packed historical explorations and delivers two of the best chapters in the book. Jacobson devotes considerable time to busting the myths of some of the cherished images of the ethnic revival–the cartoonish plucky immigrant who raises himself up by his bootstraps by virtue of nothing but the sweat of his brow. But Jacobson does far more than simply break down cherished images. In fact, that is the least of what

he does–instead he reveals the centrality of images of ethnicity to the culture wars of recent decades and shows how both conservatives and liberals appropriated ethnicity for their own purposes. Conservatives created what Jacobson calls a "non Anglo-Saxon 'we' for the so-called white ethnics," while at the same time creating "an invigorated 'we-and-they' that has informed the antimulticultural agenda" (p. 179). Liberals, meanwhile, followed another direction, embracing multiculturalism that trumpets diversity and inclusiveness. Both trends are prone to excess. The conservative white ethnicity too often embraces racism and xenophobia while the left pursues a program that can twist itself into the laughable excesses of doctrinaire political correctness. Throughout these chapters Jacobson explores the changing voting patterns of white ethnics and the rise of what many have called the New Right (though he misses an opportunity to discuss George Wallace and the transformations in regional–and racial–political patterns in the South during the period under discussion in greater depth) as well as of the rise of multiculturalism from its New Left roots and its particular strengths in radical Judaism. Jacobson acutely shows how the "blameless white identity," as embodied in the opening fictive quotation of this essay, "was inadvertently a creation of the left no less than of the right" (p. 245).

In chapter 6 Jacobson explores the ethnic revival through the prism of feminism, with a particular emphasis on Jewish feminism. White feminists found in their ethnic pasts a romanticized vision of their grandmothers just as men had found solace in compelling if false images of their self-sufficient grandfathers. For some women this was especially powerful in the personal-is-political climate of the post-civil rights era women's movement. Many ethnic women found strength in their ethnic identity only after embracing feminism, and this discovery was particularly useful as they worked to explode the beauty myth, in which looking ethnic consigned one to falling short of the mainstream (WASP) conception of beauty. Academic feminists who emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s added a level of critical analysis to issues of gender and ethnicity, especially as so many prominent feminist writers and scholars were also Jewish. Inevitably, this idealized version of an ethnic past ran headlong into conflict with black feminists, who looked at white women disavowing their whiteness with a jaundiced eye. In the minds of many black women the shared experiences of patriarchy were not enough to overcome the advantages of white skin, however its possessors tried to disavow those advantages.

Jacobson skillfully weaves all of these disparate strands together in attempting to address the question(s) posed in the last full chapter of the book: "Whose America (Who's America)?" This brilliant synthesis captures the essence of the debates surrounding diversity, immigration and the culture war. While Jacobson does not really answer the questions he poses, he presents multiple avenues for consideration. As he concludes the chapter, "*Whose America*? The question has haunted U.S. political life for a quarter century and more, as the diversity-loving heritage project merged with the idioms of white primacy in an increasingly uneasy 'nation of immigrants' " (p. 388). Whether addressing Michael Dukakis heavily emphasizing his Greek heritage in the 1988 presidential election campaign or the fights over Columbus Day, Jacobson shows how Americans simultaneously perpetuate and challenge the "nation of immigrants" trope.

Jacobson concludes with what he calls a "Coda: Ireland at JFK" (something of a pun on President Kennedy's 1963 trip to Ireland, which Jacobson discusses in chapter 1) in which he briefly addresses the current discourse on immigration. Even as Americans focus on the question of Mexicans coming to the United States, Jacobson reveals that in recent decades tens of thousands of Irish immigrants have landed on our shores, overstayed their visas, and taken up permanent residency in the country. Whatever hardships Irish immigrants might face, Jacobson shows how the "welcome mat" has largely been laid out for them by Irish Americans including politicians such as Boston's former mayor Ray Flynn (p. 391). Advantages of skin color, language, education, and a historic romanticization of the Irish immigrant have given the sons and daughters of Eire a distinct advantage over their maligned Mexican counterparts.

Jacobson's book represents one of the most significant contributions to studies of race and ethnicity in recent years, sets a new standard for the sometimes problematic field of "whiteness studies," and provides a wonderful example of contemporary history. Although the book coheres as a whole, most of the individual chapters also stand on their own as trenchant essays about discrete topics. Because of the nature of his topics, he leaves as many questions unanswered as he answers, but that clearly seems to be his objective. Jacobson has written a book that warrants wide readership not only among academics, but among a broader reading public. We may be a "nation of immigrants," but Jacobson reveals to us just how much, and at the same time how little, that clichÃ© actually means.

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