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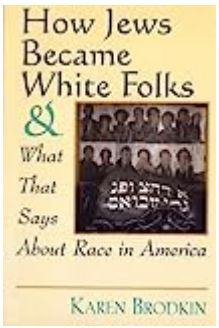

Karen Brodkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America.* New Brunswick, N.J and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998. xi + 243 pp. $18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2590-7; $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2589-1.

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In the last decade, social scientists have turned their lens to the study of "whiteness," the process whereby European immigrants arriving in the United States roughly between 1840 and 1924 gained access to race and class privilege in their new country. Scholars have argued that the massive migration during those years straddling the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about a revision of racial categories. Americans had previously believed that the Irish, as well as the various southern and eastern European "nationalities," were all racially distinct, different from each other and from the "Anglo-American stock" which made up the population of the United States. The new immigrants challenged and ultimately broke down those boundaries, and the study of whiteness takes as its subject the myriad dimensions of how they did so.

With Karen Brodkin's book, *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says about Race in America*, American Jewish history enters the conversation. The author brings her insights as an anthropologist to this dynamic synthesis of literatures across disciplines. The result is a subtle analysis of the intersections of class and gender ideologies in constituting Jewish whiteness in the United States. Brodkin presents a particularly pertinent critical summary of the literature on the economic and gender dynamics of the nuclear family, a Western bourgeois ideal she associates with whiteness. The family wage conditioned notions of masculinity and femininity by promoting the image of a family in which men earned a living and their wives in turn made homes for them and their children. With particular nuance, the author elucidates the negotiations between parents and children and men and women as they accommodate themselves to this social arrangement in the years after World War II. In doing so, she makes a welcome contribution to the growing scholarship on the politics of gender and assimilation among the descendants of east European Jewish immigrants, as each generation grappled with ever-changing models of womanhood and manhood.

One only wishes she had used as light a touch in her treatment of both whiteness in the nineteenth century and the immigrants themselves. Scholars of the Jewish and American past will be dismayed by Brodkin's characterizations of history. Brodkin summarizes the literature in Marxist labor history to make her argument that "slavery made race and ... race justified a regime of slave labor" (p. 68). She subsumes the third element in the nineteenth-century caste system, indigenous peoples, into this black/white binary, thus negating the crucial role of territorial expansion and access to land so fundamental to race-building in the era of manifest destiny. Critically, she also ignores the significant nineteenth cen-

tury presence of both Sephardi and German Jewish communities. With this omission, Brodkin perpetuates the fallacy that eastern European Jews who emigrated from Russia are the only Jews that count.

Nativist pronouncements proclaiming Jews' absolute difference and racial inferiority form the basis of Brodkin's argument for Jewish racial otherness during the immigration period at the turn of the twentieth century. This otherness was reified, she asserts, by the relegation of Jews and other European immigrant groups to deskilled industrial labor, which teleologically reinforced theories of racial difference. She neglects the fact, however, that the nativists were not the only game in town. Progressives countered them with an equally compelling vision–just as shaped by the their notions of class–of the new immigrants' place in a rapidly industrializing society. Perceiving a need for industrial labor, and the contemporary reality that immigrants fulfilled that need, Progressives put forward projects like school reform and institutionalized public health that they hoped would give the newcomers a stake in U.S. society and undermine the potential for class conflict. Unlike their nativist counterparts, Progressives viewed immigrants as mutable beings capable of transforming themselves in a democratic environment, even if the reformers tried to inculcate a monocultural Anglo-centric ideal as the goal of such transformation. So contrary to Brodkin's implication–that the gatekeepers of American identity all agreed on the pariah status of Jews–the shift in the ethnic makeup of the population due to immigration precipitated a deep conflict among Anglo-Americans regarding the ambiguous racial status of southern and eastern Europeans. This debate between nativists and Progressives explains the virulence and urgency of nativist arguments insisting on the racial inferiority of the Jews that Brodkin finds so pervasive. In fact, European migration precipitated a crisis among the Anglo American gatekeepers of the nation in a way that the presence of African Americans and native peoples never had. Indeed, their absence from the terms of debate indicates that these groups, and not Europeans, were unproblematically excluded from national belonging.

Brodkin argues that in response to exclusion, Jews formed working-class communities of interdependent individuals based on either an explicit commitment to or an implicit orientation toward Jewish socialism. This is an overly romanticized view, however. Brodkin draws a sharp contrast between her grandmother's world of working-class domesticity in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, where she presided over a household economy to which children, extended kin, and even neighbors contributed, and her mother's escape to suburban isolation in the late forties. But Sheepshead Bay was already a few steps removed from the Lower East Side, and by no means a location of a "pure" immigrant community untainted by the stains of bourgeois convention. Brodkin's mother, in moving to the Long Island suburb of Valley Stream, was only doing what her own mother had done–loosening the bonds of the tight circle of community by means of geographic and economic mobility. Sheepshead Bay was just as crisply new in the twenties as Valley Stream would be a generation later.

Brodkin's view radically de-emphasizes Jewish immigrants' assimilationist passions. As historians like Andrew Heinze (whose important 1990 book *Adapting to Abundance* does not appear in Brodkin's bibliography) have shown, this drive was evident from the start, as was the immigrants' eagerness to meet the cultural demands of belonging in the U.S. Even in the immigrant generation, for example, Jews demonstrated their appreciation of the "whitening" power of the family wage by curtailing wives' contributions of wages to the household economy, and many sought to cut off their money-making activities within the household as soon as possible. They thus claimed for themselves the prerogative of the family wage, and the middle class status that went along with it.

Jews' assimilationist aspirations did not necessarily undermine their commitment to a socialist worldview. On the contrary, the immigrant community often expressed contradictory impulses while trying to define its place in its new society. Attention to the ways in which they expressed their desire to belong, however, does make comprehensible their enthusiastic ascent into middle-class affluence and race privilege in the postwar years, once the gates to universities, professions and Gentile neighborhoods were flung open. In Brodkin's scenario, Jews consented to the government programs of the forties and fifties promoting the social mobility of "Euromales" and making whiteness possible. At this point, Jewish socialism disappears from her analysis without explanation.

Brodkin makes a convincing and powerfully systematic argument that post-war policies like the GI bill and those of the Federal Housing Administration effectively translated into de facto "affirmative action" for the male children and grandchildren of immigrants, thus promoting the whiteness of southern and eastern Europeans while purposefully excluding African Americans from

race and class privilege. To hear Brodkin tell it, however, this alone sufficed to make Jews white. It is questionable whether the power of government decree alone, whether overt or discrete, can create such fundamental social change. A case in point: the courts, legislatures and executives of this land have implemented thirty years' worth of racial remedies aimed at promoting the social and legal equality of African Americans, with dubious success. One must ask why the government hand wielded such power in one case and not the other. A possible influence among many complicated factors is white skin privilege. The reality that many Jews could easily "pass" as northern Europeans meant that their continued exclusion from race privilege would have called for constant policing of racial boundaries and an obsession with ethnic pedigrees in schools, work places, and government institutions. European exclusion would also have translated into minority rule by Anglos, putting them in a precarious, eternally paranoid, and fundamentally untenable social position.

The strength of *How Jews Became White Folks* lies in its command of many disciplines. If it elicits complaints from a specialist in a particular field, that does not diminish the overall potency of Brodkin's message. Her analysis challenges efficacy of Jewish upward mobility by demonstrating that Jewish belonging has had its costs. For one, it has occurred at the expense of the continued exclusion of non-white groups. Perhaps more salient to this audience, Brodkin suggests, as others have, that Jewish meaning has been lost in an exchange with the communal well-being inherent in whiteness. She ends up advocating a return to *yiddishkeit*–defined as a commitment to the Jewish people–as a way for Jews of eastern European descent in the U.S. to opt out of whiteness and reclaim the collective significance of Jewishness. In light of the intimate connections among race, class, nation, gender, and family that Brodkin weaves, a resurgence of yiddishkeit would be no less than revolutionary.

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