THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF WHITENESS

Scholars in several disciplines have discovered that racial whiteness can be quite changeable. The nineteenth-century antagonism between the English and the Irish, for instance, was at the time a racial conflict between Anglo-Saxons and Celts, though few today would invoke the language of race in recounting the "Troubles." Having emigrated to North America, moreover, many maligned Celts took on a new racial identity, now participating in a politics of white supremacy in groups like The Order of Caucasians, often right alongside the Anglo-Saxons with whom, in other settings, their racial equality was so vigorously denied.

These observations raise a number of questions in their turn. If whiteness is indeed changeable, under what circumstances does it change? What have been the historical patterns that characterize whiteness and its vicissitudes? What does the racial history of European immigration look like across the chronological sweep of U.S. history?

The three chapters of part one sketch the history of whiteness through three periods in the American setting. The contending forces that have fashioned and refashioned whiteness in the United States across time, I argue, are capitalism (with its insatiable appetite for cheap labor) and republicanism (with its imperative of responsible citizenship). Citizenship was a racially inscribed concept at the outset of the new nation: by an act of Congress, only "free white" immigrants could be naturalized. Yet as
immigration soared in the second half of the nineteenth century, incoming "white" peasants and laborers from unanticipated regions of Europe aroused doubts about this equation of "whiteness" with "fitness for self-government." Over the latter half of the nineteenth century a second regime of racial understanding emerged in response, cataloguing the newcomers as racial types, pronouncing upon their innate, biological distance from the nation's "original stock," and speculating as to their fitness for citizenship. This regime culminated in the racially based and highly restrictive immigration legislation of 1924, which in its turn laid the way for yet a third racial regime.

The period from the 1920s to the 1960s saw a dramatic decline in the perceived differences among these white Others. Immigration restriction, along with internal black migrations, altered the nation's racial alchemy and redrew the dominant racial configuration along the strict, binary line of white and black, creating Caucasians where before had been so many Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, and Slavs.

To track racial whiteness across time is to depict American political culture in its major adjustments, as shifting demographics have chafed against the more rigid imperatives of this fragile experiment in self-governance. To trace the process by which Celts or Slavs became Caucasians is to recognize race as an ideological, political deployment rather than as a neutral, biologically determined element of nature.
"All men are created equal." So wrote Thomas Jefferson, and so agreed with him the delegates from the American colonies. But we must not press them too closely nor insist on the literal interpretation of their words.

—John R. Commons, Races and Immigrants in America (1907)

Tell the republicans on your side of the line that we royalists do not know men by their color. Should you come to us you will be entitled to all the privileges of the rest of His Majesty's subjects.

—Governor of Upper Canada to a delegation of Cincinnati Negroes (1829)

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"Free White Persons" in the Republic, 1790–1840

In Modern Chivalry (1792), Hugh Henry Brackenridge's extended meditation on republican government, the Irish servant Teague O'Regan undergoes a dramatic transformation. When he is introduced in the novel's opening paragraph, the servant is but a cipher—"an Irishman," according to Brackenridge's contemptuous narrator, "whose name was Teague O'regan [later O'Regan]. I shall say nothing of the character of this man, because the very name imports what he was." By the closing lines, some eight hundred pages later, O'Regan has become the novel's central character, he has pursued with some success the plums made available by the new nation's democratic politics, and the narrator is reflecting on the possibility that, in some future volume, "my bog-trotter" might even venture to England as the U.S. ambassador.¹

This transformation reflects not only the Irishman's mobility of station but also a certain alchemy of race. The "aborigines of Ireland," Brackenridge avers, "are far from being destitute of talents, and yet there is a certain liability to blunders, both in their words and actions, that is singular." Here as elsewhere the narrative testifies to certain immutable
truths about the national character of the aboriginal Irish. Indeed, there is a certain ideological alignment in the classification of the "aboriginal Irish" (as distinct, presumably, from their Anglo-Irish rulers) on the one hand, and the North American aborigines on the other: an Indian treaty-maker approaches O'Regan's employer, for example, with the scheme of "borrowing" the Irishman to play the part of an Indian chief for the staging of a treaty. Teague O'Regan, according to this script, will be "king of the kickapoos" for a treaty highly beneficial to white settlers. He is well suited to the part of Indian chief because he happens to speak the "necessary gibberish."  

And yet it is by his favorable contrast to these same Indians, ultimately, that the bog-trotter O'Regan becomes an acceptable member of the white polity. His political fortunes first begin to turn after he delivers a rousing speech on the question of how to deal with "de vile savages":

I have heard of dese Indians; plase your honouris; dey come out of de woods, and stale shape, like de rabbers in Ireland, and burn houses, and take scoops; trate wid dese! I would trate wid dem, wid a good shelelah, or tomahawk to break deir heads. Give dem goods! by Shaint Patrick, I would give dem a good bullet hole in deir faces; or shoot dem trough de backside for deir pains. If I was in Congress, and God love your shoulis, I wish you would put me dere, I would make a law to coot dem aff, every one o' dem... Trate wid dem! Trate wid de wolves or de bears, dar roon troo de woods: I would trate wid a good knock in dere troat, and be doon wid dem.

These sentiments, so forcefully spoken, go a long way in making a proper republican of the Irish aboriginal. Indeed, "those particularly who were for using force against the savages, thought the Irish gentleman had spoken very well."

Later, while serving in a war party, O'Regan accidentally sacks a detachment of Indians after he happens upon them in his own ill-fated attempt to get away: he appears fearlessly to be advancing even in his haste to beat a retreat; his shouts of alarmed surprise are taken for shouts of confidence. He becomes the accidental victor: "When the party of the whites came up to the brow of the hill, and saw the bog-trotter in possession of the ground and the booty, they took it for granted, that singly, and alone, he had discomfitted the Indians." On the strength of such heroism, he is named a commissioner for executing future treaties: rather
than representing the Indians by playing "chief," he will now represent
the white settlers. His transformation is complete. Thus, in spite of him-
self, does O'Regan become a hero in this crucible of Indian warfare, and
thus does he traverse the social distance separating "bog-trotters" from
"the party of whites" that is the New World polity.

Modern Chivalry thus anticipates one of the throughlines of American
political culture for decades to come: republicanism would favor or ex-
clude certain peoples on the basis of their "fitness for self-government,"
as the phrase went, and some questionable peoples would win inclusion
based upon an alchemic reaction attending Euro-American contact with
peoples of color. "Can a bog-trotter just from Ireland like you be supposed
to be cognizant of the genius of the people sufficiently to form a consti-
tution for them?" one character asks, as O'Regan's appetite for political
participation piques. Brackenridge's final answer is, no, perhaps the "gen-
ius" of the people will ever elude the bog-trotter, and yet, nonetheless,
O'Regan can number himself among "the people" by his essays in Indian-
hating. (Years later James Hall rendered this dynamic with admirable
economy: "I believe that in killing the savage I performed my duty as a
man and served my country as a citizen.")

"Whiteness" has recently received important scholarly attention, and
yet the reigning paradigms among historians—coming primarily from the
direction of working-class or labor history—have not yet exhausted its
full complexity. Most notable in this regard are Theodore Allen's Inven-
tion of the White Race and David Roediger's Wages of Whiteness. Allen's
is a brilliantly conceived study of the "relativity of race" documenting
how the Irish who had been downtrodden "Celts" on one side of the
Atlantic became privileged "whites" on the other. But however nuanced
Allen's depiction of an ever changeable racial Irishness, his argument re-
 mains at bottom a rather rigid economic argument about "racial oppres-
sion and social control." Race here operates primarily to create an "in-
termediate buffer social control stratum" that bolsters the capitalist order
by winning the allegiance of the potentially disaffected: "Propertyless
classes are recruited into the intermediate stratum, through anomalous
'racial' privileges not involving escape from propertylessness." Hence the
moment the oppressed Celts set foot on American soil, "however lowly
their social status might otherwise be they were endowed with all the
immunities, rights, and privileges of 'American whites,'" and thus became
"enrolled in the system of racial oppression of all African-Americans."
Politics in the United States thus reiterates the "perfectly devilish ingenuity," in James Connolly’s phrase, by which the allegiance of economically oppressed laborers was won through racial privilege.

Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* similarly opens up important terrain in the problematics of whiteness, and it does so with tremendous subtlety when it comes to the intersections of political economy, class formation, and psychology. Yet because Roediger also comes at this problem from the angle of labor history, his work, too, remains wedded to economic models in its handling of the question. In Roediger’s account the attribution of whiteness does not depend on a natural—or even a static—condition, but rather represents “a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline.” The key to his argument is W. E. B. Du Bois’s formulation that, despite a low monetary wage, white workers were compensated by a “public and psychological wage” involving “public deference” and their preferential “personal treatment” by key social and political institutions.*

Both works convey in important and ingenious ways the instability and relativity of race, but, in focusing upon class and economics as the primary movers of race, they fall short in three respects. First, neither captures the full complexity of whiteness in its vicissitudes: what are the significant points of divergence and alignment among categories such as—taking the Irish as an example—white, Caucasian, and Celt? How do the three ideas operate at a given moment? How do they differ? What does each accomplish in the social order, and for whom? What is at stake in these competing versions of racial reality?

Second, though both Allen and Roediger nicely melt down the seeming fixities of race to reveal its fluidity at certain moments, neither sets whiteness against a broad historical backdrop. This is especially debilitating for Roediger’s argument as it relates to the escalating salience of whiteness for Irish workers at mid-century: the phrase “free white persons” had been on the books since 1790, and was indeed responsible for their possibility of naturalized citizenship in the first place. Did whiteness assume a new place in American systems of “difference” in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s, or was it simply cast in bolder relief by new political, social, economic, and demographic circumstances? Were Americans seeing whiteness differently in the 1870s than they had in the 1790s? Than they would in the 1920s? Because the certainties represented by race are bound in a wildly
complex skein of political, economic, cultural, ideological, psychological, and perceptual strands, their movements are glacial rather than catastrophic, uneven rather than linear or steady. Thus the historical twists and turns taken by a racial idea like *white*, *Celt*, or *Caucasian* are best charted across more time rather than less—scores and even hundreds of years rather than mere decades.

Finally, and most important, neither Roediger nor Allen adequately depicts the struggle over defining whiteness and apportioning its privileges outside the economic arenas of class concern and social control. Economic models may indeed explain the racial valences of "self-respect" in nineteenth-century America and the nexus between working-class, largely Irish, aggrieved entitlement on the one hand, and the eager embrace of a self-affirming whiteness on the other. Allen's "social control" model, likewise, may reveal quite a lot about the "spontaneous allegiance" of Irish workers, and their claim to prior rights over the "Negro," summed up in the insistence—as New York's *Weekly Caucasian* had it in the 1860s—that "this Government was made on the white basis . . . for the Benefit of white men." Economics alone, however, cannot explain why this government was made on the "white basis" to begin with; nor can economics alone explain why native elites again and again tried to deny peoples like Celts (and Jews and Armenians and Italians and Slavs) a full share in whiteness itself—that is, why native elites tried to deny them the "public and psychological wage" that was allegedly holding these potentially rebellious masses in check. Economics alone cannot explain why, as patrician New Yorkers looked out their windows at Irish rioters in 1863, they saw, not so many "white men," but "thousands of barbarians in our midst every whit as ferocious in their instincts as the Minnesota savages"—the multiplied, essentialized "Celt," whose "impulsiveness . . . prompts him to be foremost in every outburst." Nor, most important, can economics alone explain why the Irish themselves, like the novelist John Brennan, often commented upon their racial distinctiveness from other whites on the American scene.

One need look further, at the complex crosscurrents at the confluence of capitalism, republicanism, and the diasporic sensibilities of various racially defined groups themselves. In his satiric novel *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* (1928), Sinclair Lewis pointed out one of the critical integers in the equation of race and economics. Amid a harangue about the political debates surrounding birth control, Lewis's "Nordic Citizen" remarks,
One faction claims that the superior classes like ourselves, in fact the great British stock, had ought to produce as many kids as possible, to keep in control of this great nation and maintain the ideals for which we and our ancestors have always stood, while these lower masses hadn’t ought to spawn their less intellectual masses. But then again, there’s them that hold and maintain that now we’ve cut down immigration, we need a supply of cheap labor, and where get it better than by encouraging these Wops and Hunks and Spigs and so on to raise as many brats as they can.

The Nordic’s crass statement of the conflict between the ideal “control of this great nation” on the one hand and the ever-pressing need for “cheap labor” on the other fairly sums up a tension between the imperatives of democracy and the imperatives of capitalism that is integral to American political culture. Historically this tension has heavily inflected American race thinking. Categories of race have fluctuated, not only in response to the imperatives of a segmented labor market, or to the “spontaneous allegiance” of white workers based on their own perceived whiteness, but also to perceptions of “fitness for self-government.” The very “inferiority” that suits a given group to a particular niche in the economy, for instance, may raise serious questions about its participation in a self-governing democracy; the very “psychological wage” of whiteness that might win workers’ allegiance to capitalism confers a degree of political entitlement altogether threatening to the republic. In short, the idea of a wage economy established “on the white basis” may be useful, whereas a government “on the white basis” may be quite dangerous. Hence a major element of the contest over whiteness: the Celt may be white, but he is nonetheless a savage. (A second element, of course, is the white immigrants’ own view of their relative consanguinity with native whites. Many came ashore bearing historical baggage of racial thought and racial perception themselves; Celtic or Hebrew identity was not merely pressed upon them from without by native republicans convinced of Anglo-Saxon virtue, but was a self-ascription as well—a politically useful idiom in the service, say, of Irish nationalism or Zionism.)

This is not to minimize the significance of economics and class in racial formation. Race and class are intertwined in ways that even Roediger and Allen have yet to explore fully. First, republican notions of “independence” had both racial and economic valences; the white men’s movement for “Free Labor, Free Soil, and Free Men” was but the flipside of certain
racial notions such as a belief in the Indian's innate "dependency." Second, racial stereotypes like inborn "laziness," as applied to Mexicans or Indians, were economic assessments that had economic consequences (in the form, typically, of dispossession). Third, race has been central to American conceptions of property (who can own property and who can be property, for example), and property in its turn is central to republican notions of self-possession and the "stake in society" necessary for democratic participation. Fourth, political standing, doled out on racial terms (such as the naturalization code limiting citizenship to "free white persons"), translates immediately into economic realities such as property rights or labor-market segmentation. And fifth, in cases in American political culture ranging from the Mexican population of Old California to the immigrant Jews of New York's Lower East Side, class markers have often been read as inborn racial characteristics: members of the working class in these groups have been viewed in more sharply racial terms than have their upper-class compatriots.11

It is not my interest, then, to minimize the significance of class and economics; rather, since class has received most of the attention afforded questions of whiteness in the scholarship thus far, I will go into other areas more fully—especially the areas of national subjectivity and national belonging—as they both inflect and are inflected by racial conceptions of peoplehood, self-possession, fitness for self-government, and collective destiny.

Reviewing the Dillingham Commission Report on Immigration, which significantly constricted whiteness as it bore on eligibility for naturalized citizenship, the eugenicist Harry Laughlin of the Carnegie Foundation remarked, "We in this country have been so imbued with the idea of democracy, or the equality of all men, that we have left out of consideration the matter of blood or natural inborn hereditary mental and moral differences. No man who breeds pedigreed plants and animals can afford to neglect this thing."12 On the contrary, the "idea of democracy" had never neglected "this thing" about the matter of blood or natural inborn differences, and contested notions of "inborn difference" are themselves as traceable to the imperatives of democracy as they are to the imperatives of capitalism. Chinese Exclusion and the precarious political status of free blacks in the North are two of the more obvious evidences of this. The topography of American politics from the Revolution through the twentieth century has been a contest over the "inborn differences" among various groups—not least, among the "free white persons" who entered the