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Whiteness – too blunt an instrument?

A reply to David Roediger

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David Roediger has, as one would expect, written an eloquent and impeccably documented reply to my debate article. I think we agree on a great deal, but our agreement weakens rather than reinforces the case for the whiteness paradigm.

I would summarize Roediger's response as essentially a defence of the importance of race – especially white racism, which he deems generally more important than ethnicity in explaining dominant-group social action in the United States. He writes that in the American context, white racism was responsible for slavery, mob violence and the denial of civil rights to non-white Americans. He notes that the actions committed in the name of dominant ethnicity were much less severe. Thus white racism against 'peoples of colour' proved a greater injustice than those committed by WASPs (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) against white ethnics. Roediger also returns to the idea that 'owning a white skin had tremendous value'.

I couldn't agree more. I say as much in my original article when I argue that being non-white mattered for Chinese and African-Americans much more than being non-'white' mattered for the Irish in Boston in 1859. But this precisely proves my point and undercuts the foundations of the whiteness paradigm, with its talk of whiteness as an entirely elastic social construction.

I want to begin with terminology. The way Roediger writes makes it clear that he understands the difference between race (based on visible phenotypical traits) and ethnicity (about subjective myths of origin). He agrees that that the key discriminant for social relations was/is between 'owning a white skin' and being a person 'of colour'. This key (racial) difference is contrasted with the less important difference based on religion and language: that between WASPs and other white ethnics. So why don't we stop conflating our concepts and speak about the first difference as racial and the second as ethnic. We can go a step further and unpack the elusive 'whiteness': we should instead speak of the *dominant racial group* as 'white' and the *dominant ethnic group* as WASP.

Along the way, we can get rid of the fiction that the Irish and Poles were ever in the same category as blacks. They were always racially white because people didn't need a mysterious ideology of 'whiteness' to discern colour perceptions – even in 1850 or 1900. The Irish may have been treated as subhuman at times, but as one nasty commentator remarked, they were

'white chimpanzees'. True, some Mexicans and Sicilians occupied a grey zone, but they were very much the exception and not the rule for most immigrant groups. In short, nobody 'became' white. What actually occurred was a rolling process whereby white ethnics gradually gained greater economic, political and cultural success. This began with Catholic voting rights in the 18th-century and culminated in white ethnics' attainment of the presidency in 1960 and their widespread intermarriage and integration with WASPs in the 1960s. Today, the *entire* dominant white racial group (not only WASPs, but Catholics and Jews) has become the dominant American ethnic group, something that could not be said before 1970.

In my original article, I pointed to five serious omissions in the White Studies approach: (1) a constructivism that fails to recognize the cognitive and social processes that underpin social 'reality'; (2) an excessive emphasis on ethnic boundaries and the scope for identity construction, which underplays the importance of ethno-historical narratives and path-dependency; (3) a tacit belief in white exceptionalism, that over-emphasizes the ideological character of whiteness and deifies whites; (4) an elision of the concepts of dominant ethnicity and race; and (5) a threefold parochialism in terms of place, time horizon and the role of race in ethnic studies.

I have already dealt with concerns (1),(2) and (4), none of which I consider to be challenged by Roediger's reply. I will now move on to consider the third. The point was not to deny the very real history of white racism or the colonial domination of light-skinned peoples over darker-skinned ones since 1600, but to question how important a role the ideology of whiteness actually played in this sad drama. We need to question whether white supremacy really owes much to deliberate ideological fantasies or whether it is the 'psychic wage' that tends to accrue to politico-economically successful racial groups. This will likely fade by 2050 when whites make up 6 percent of the world's population, down from 30 percent in 1900, and China and India are economic powerhouses. Once again, I do not see any rigorous demonstration that the ideology of whiteness (whose hidden power the 'whiteness' scholars claim to expose) is a powerful source of social power akin to dominant ethnic nationalism, not to mention capitalism or technology. To maintain otherwise would require a systematic comparative history that contrasts the European 'racial' period (post-1800 or post-1850) with other slave epochs (pre-1800 European colonial, Byzantine, Ottoman, Roman, etc.).

The point about parochialism was addressed by Roediger through use of his fascinating Japanese examples. Here the response is that the Japanese can better apprehend their structures of inequality (i.e. Burakumin, Koreans) through an analogy with the 'workings' of whiteness in the United States. I agree only insofar as both societies had non-economic sources of inequality and 'dominant groups'. But a great deal more could be learned

by unpacking 'dominance' into its caste, ethnic and racial components. Dominant ethnicity seems to me to be the most important aspect of the Japanese case – here the Japanese were informed by a myth of ancestry and a cultural marker based on language and not race. This set the Japanese apart from the Chinese, Okinawans and Koreans they colonized. Caste is another issue that can be investigated (here the relevant comparison is India). Finally, race seems to me to be the least important issue since, unlike the American case, phenotypical differences did not play a major role in Japan or its colonies.

In other words, in Japan, as in most of the rest of the world, inter-group conflict concerns people who look like each other but *ethnically* differ in terms of their subjective myths of ancestry/history/homeland. Language or religion, not race, is the key cultural marker. A language of ethnic superiority linked to heredity was invoked by the Japanese, and this definitely led to a harsher treatment of outgroups. But their mistreatment of the Okinawans, Burakumin and others predates the rise of any racial ideologies – core differences were instead rooted in popular myths and cultural differences based on language. Today, the racial ideologies matter a great deal less. On the other hand, differences based on visible racial markers are increasingly important as long-distance migration increases. Even so, the primary concern of dominant groups is with maintaining an imagined congruence between ethnicity and territory. This is about ethnic myths that mystically connect homelands, 'golden ages' and cultural markers, and has little to do with notions of white supremacy or an irrational fear of the 'other'.

The latter mattered at specific points and contexts in the modern period – especially the early 20th-century – but counts for much less today when direct contact with the 'other' in all walks of social life leaves less room for fantasy. The 'whiteness' paradigm, which emerged from a context in which white supremacy and an irrational fear of the 'negro' reigned, is thus poorly suited to the task of dissecting the very real conflicts of our age. Nor can the conceit be sustained that whiteness is a useful mirror with which to approach all non-economic inequalities. Instead, it is a blunt academic instrument that elides the critical differences between ethnic, caste and racial conflicts.

All of this should not obscure our debt to David Roediger and the whiteness school he inaugurated. This debate is a testimony to the important issues first raised by Roediger. Furthermore, there are societies where racial differences within ethnic groups matter. Lighter skin does bring advantages in much of Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, parts of the Middle East and in Africa. These are not ethnic or nationalist issues, but racial issues, and it is here that studies of whiteness should focus their efforts. Indeed, much more needs to be done to expose these inequalities.

However, when it comes to explaining the explosive contemporary issue

of majority responses to multiculturalism and immigration, White Studies merely provides a set of intellectual training wheels that should be surpassed (though not ‘abolished’) to focus on dominant ethnicity.

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