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## The dominant ethnic moment

*Towards the abolition of 'whiteness'?*

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### INTRODUCTION

In the past decade and a half, the study of the American white majority has blossomed into a major academic endeavour. So-called 'White Studies' provided an important service in opening up a 'hidden' field of study that remained neglected as recently as the early 1990s. However, in this debate, I suggest that while the study of whites and white racial systems is important, the White Studies approach possesses little heuristic value for scholars attempting to explain majority responses to multicultural politics. 'Whiteness' is a colloquial term used by local actors to describe the lived reality of dominant ethnicity as it appears from the 'inside' of American society. Scholars should be more critical, comparative and discerning than their subjects: 'white' is the particular racial boundary marker that distinguishes dominant ethnic groups from subaltern ones in a small proportion of the world's nations. Whiteness informs, but does not constitute, dominant ethnicity and we should not mistake the content of group boundary markers for the essentials. Particular cultural markers are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for ethnicity.

The position I advance goes further, claiming that White Studies suffers from a number of serious flaws that should lead us to question whether this approach can continue to advance the frontiers of knowledge in the wider sphere of ethnic and racial studies. These flaws include: (1) a constructivism that fails to recognize the cognitive and social processes that underpin social 'reality'; (2) an excessive emphasis on ethnic boundaries as opposed to ethnic narratives, thereby overstating the degree of malleability possible in ethnic identity; (3) a tacit belief in *white exceptionalism*, which

overemphasizes the ideological character of whiteness and deifies whites; (4) an elision of dominant ethnicity and race; and (5) a threefold parochialism in terms of place, time horizon and the role of race in ethnic studies. The first four flaws lead to problematic interpretations of the American context, while the final omission greatly hinders the usefulness of the whiteness paradigm outside the United States. This article therefore begins by examining the American case and then moves to consider the international arena.

An alternative to White Studies that avoids its pitfalls and helps us to better comprehend the rising sociopolitical forces of our time is the emerging study of *dominant ethnicity*. Grounded in a less reductionist, more international and more nuanced analytical context, I believe the dominant ethnicity approach provides the best way forward for understanding majority-group and dominant minority movements. Dominant ethnicity cannot encompass everything, and needs to be complemented by a racial studies perspective that can address problems that lie beyond the scope of ethnic studies. However, I contend that the study of dominant ethnicity provides the most useful perspective for understanding the recent upsurge in anti-multicultural politics in the West.

### **Social construction**

This article takes a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer, 1995; Bader, 2001: 252) as its starting point, and stresses the importance of mutually understood concepts for the advancement of human knowledge. This approach rejects the use of subjects' constructions as the basis for scholarly categories unless those constructions afford us a useful way of understanding social reality. Our social reality is ultimately constructed by the way we process sense-impressions, but it is a fallacy to move from this accurate observation to the post-structuralist conceit that concepts are simply power-driven paradigms without empirical referent. Physicists have shown that the colour spectrum is simply a continuum of wavelength with no natural breaks. Yet anthropologists have shown remarkable cross-cultural agreement over colour. We all have a name for 'blue' as a colour in a way that we do not for 'blue-green' (Dawkins, 2004: 31). Much the same could be said about many objects from trees to chairs.

Does the same cross-cultural 'auto-focus' apply to concepts like ethnicity or race? Clearly not, or we would not face problems of contested concepts. On the other hand, the wide degree of social scientific agreement over concepts that prevents us from publishing ethnic studies articles in the *American Economic Review* illustrates that we agree on far more than we care to acknowledge. The question, therefore, is the degree to which the social world represents a break with that of the natural. Elsewhere, I claim that there is no complete break, but rather a gradation of conceptual

fuzziness that increases as one moves from the 'hardest' of natural sciences to, say, literary criticism (Kaufmann, 1999). In terms of scholarly concepts in our field, I am relatively optimistic: there is a sound empirical substrate of auto-constructed reality with which to work.

Let us be more specific. In this debate, I use the term 'ethnic group' or *ethnie* to refer to a named, imagined, human community, many of whose members believe in a myth of shared ancestry and place of origin (Smith, 1991). Ethnic groups are imagined communities because, contra the primordialists, they must be larger than a face-to-face *gemeinschaft*. Cultural markers, like language, religion, customs and phenotype (or 'race') are *used* by ethnies to demarcate their boundaries, thus ethnic groups need to possess at least one (but no more than one) diacritical marker. Dominant ethnic groups are ethnies that are dominant within a particular nation state or sub-state nation (i.e. Japanese in Japan, Scots Protestants in Scotland). *Race*, on the other hand, refers to communities or categories marked out by phenotypical differences. This holds despite widespread disagreement over where racial boundaries lie. Racial categories can exist within an ethnic group, i.e. skin-colour differences within the Hindu (caste), Italian (North–South) or Jewish (Ashkenazi–Mizrahim) ethnies; or they can transcend ethnic groups (i.e. 'whites' in Europe, North America and elsewhere). This is not to reify these genetically problematic categories, but merely to acknowledge their importance to the actors that apprehend them.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, *nations* are integrated, modern communities of territory and history that have political aspirations. *States*, by contrast, are political units that have a monopoly on the use of force within their particular bounded territory.

### **White Studies**

The origin of White Studies, as David Roediger notes, lies in the pre-Civil Rights period in the perceptive analyses of African-American writers such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin. Developing from roots in critical race theory in the 1970s, and drawing upon the insights of these earlier African-American scholars, White Studies addressed an often-neglected aspect of American ethnic and race relations: the majority group (Roediger, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997). As Ashley Doane astutely put it, the ethnic and racial identity of the dominant group remained 'hidden' and dominant group members were able to set the academic agenda, which focused on the study of what they deemed strange, problematic or exotic. Nowhere was the equation of 'ethnic' with 'minority' clearer than in the title of Donald Ramsey Young's *American Minority Peoples* (1932) (Doane, 1997; Doane, 2003: 7).

Work based on the White Studies approach spans not only theory, literary and cultural studies, but also law and citizenship (Haney-Lopez,

1996; Smith, 1997), history (Roediger, 1991, 1994), anthropology (Gallagher, 2003), sociology (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and political science (Perea, 1997). A number of points of unity are apparent. First, a focus on the previously neglected contours of the majority white group. Second, a treatment of the American past that emphasizes the oppression experienced by those deemed to be 'non-white' rather than the myth of American universalism. Third, a shared constructivist approach to white identity that focuses on shifts in the definition of whiteness across time and place. Fourth, a belief in *white exceptionalism*: namely, in the idea of whiteness as a politically motivated hegemonic ideology that is independent of normal processes of collective identification. Finally, an elision of the racial 'white' and ethnic 'WASP' (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) categories that are seen as coterminous elements of an evolving racial power structure. These principles inform a politics of deconstruction that seeks to expose the constructed foundations of white hegemony in the United States. A corollary of this is that the whiteness perspective can help to expose and resist policies of liberal neutrality that might undermine support for collective rights policies such as affirmative action and bilingual education. Though White Studies has focused on the American case, this discourse is increasingly making its presence felt outside the American context, as is evident in the work of British writers such as Alistair Bonnett and Stuart Hall (Bonnett, 2000).

## THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

In order to properly evaluate the claims of White Studies scholars, we need to begin with the American context. There is no question that discussion of the majority group was a major lacuna in American discussions of race and ethnicity. The focus on minorities partly stemmed from Eurocentric constructions of the immigrant or non-white 'other' as a social problem. It partly arose because the dominant WASP group could not see itself as 'ethnic' since it viewed the nation as coterminous with its own identity. However, another major reason for the 'hiding' of dominant group identity was an ideological insistence among the post-war ancestors of today's neoconservatives: the 'consensus' historians and intellectuals. They believed that the United States was, unlike European nations, an exceptional 'universal' nation that had never had an ethnic core (Lipset, 1968). In fact, as White Studies scholars correctly point out, there was an ethnic/racial component to the American nation based on white Anglo-Protestant superiority and the need to assimilate immigrants along anglo-conformist lines. However, I will argue that this process is more accurately described as *ethnic* rather than racial.

### ***The role of boundary construction***

Another commonplace of White Studies writing is the idea that various European ethnic groups ‘became’ white, partly by accepting the racialized social structure of American society in which non-Caucasians were excluded. The Irish Catholics are cited as the classic example of this. Noel Ignatiev and David Roediger (among others) claim that the Irish ‘became’ white by arguing for their rights as whites (rather than as Americans) and that this collusion became manifest in major left-wing institutions such as the American Federation of Labour and the Democratic Party (Roediger, 1991; Ignatiev, 1995). Roediger and others certainly make a convincing case that American society became more inclusive of the Irish after the Civil War, whilst maintaining rigid segregation along racial lines, but does it really make sense to speak of the Irish ‘becoming white’?

I would argue that this is an example of where scholars need to distance themselves from their subjects’ colloquial terminology. The term ‘white’ was occasionally used to differentiate non-WASP (or ‘new’) European immigrants from established groups, and some European immigrants, such as the Italians in Louisiana, did experience a withdrawal of civil rights (Roediger and Barrett, 2002). ‘White’ was also occasionally used by dominant group members to refer to themselves. Yet for the most part, it was dominant WASP ethnicity that counted. ‘White’ was one of many different colloquial names for the dominant ethnic group, most often used in the south, where there were few white ethnics to problematize the white/WASP distinction. For instance, terms like ‘American’, ‘old American’, ‘native American’, ‘Yankee’ or ‘Protestant’ were at least as common as ‘white’ – especially north of the Mason and Dixon line where there were fewer blacks and more white ethnics. This emerges in community studies such as *Yankee City* (Warner and Lunt, 1941) or the Lynds’ *Middletown* (Lynd and Lynd, 1929). In Herman Lantz’s account of a 1950s coal community (presumably in Ohio or Pennsylvania), a ‘native’ Protestant woman lamented:

I don’t think that parents . . . care for their children marrying foreigners, but they can’t do much about it . . . there is more intermarriage between the *natives* and foreigners today than there was in the olden time. You see, today there soon won’t be any *true American* because they marry up with these foreigners. (Lantz, 1958: 57–8, emphasis added)

A broader sense of ‘Caucasian’ whiteness did exist among a majority of Americans, but only as a secondary identity. It did not stir the imagination as strongly as ethnicity, though it mattered greatly when it came to social interaction, citizenship and civil rights. The important point to take from this is the semantics of the term ‘white.’ It could refer to major phenotypical distinctions, i.e. the ‘Caucasian’ racial group, or it could be used as one of a number of terms for the dominant ethnic group. In both cases, there was a

psychic and material payoff to being included as 'white.' Yet the two usages never blended into one in the popular mind, and their conflation by scholars working in the White Studies mode is a misrepresentation of the historical record. Thus the term 'white' meant something quite rigid when applied to the Chinese in California in 1882 or southern blacks in the 1920s. By contrast, Benjamin Franklin's exegesis on the 'tawny' Germans in the 1750s or talk of the non-whiteness of southern and eastern Europeans around 1900 lacked the same degree of concreteness and social combustibility.

After all, if whiteness is a mere construct, why didn't white Anglo-Protestants 'construct' black Anglo-Protestants as 'American' in order to mould an anti-Catholic alliance (the pre-World War II Republican Party notwithstanding)? Certainly the Catholic population was a large and growing force, hence much more threatening to WASP power than the African-Americans, and so it would have made more sense for white Protestants to join forces with a group untainted by 'Popery'. The answer, surely, is that socially 'real' limits to identity construction were placed on WASPs by the way we process colour impressions and by pre-existing racial identities (however weak). These were more powerful than religious bonds in the American case, which meant that white ethnics would always have greater mobility than even long-resident non-whites. This is true in many societies, but not in every society, as Donald Horowitz makes clear when commenting on how the Islam-Christian ethnic divide overpowers the racial divide between white and black Moors in Mauretania<sup>2</sup> (Horowitz, 1985).

An overly constructivist interpretation of whiteness places a great deal of emphasis on shifts in boundaries, hence White Studies scholars claim that the Irish became white after the 1860s when the Democratic party courted them as part of the class of free white labourers (Roediger, 1991: 170). But why is the 1860s such a turning point? Irish Catholics were greatly over-represented in the bottom rungs of society and in the prison population well into the 20th-century. So much so that they earned a special mention in the eugenics-inspired 1911 Dillingham Commission report (King, 2000), Their religion was deemed a threat to the Republic until the late 1920s and they had no hope of joining the WASP elite based in the eastern universities, government and business (Baltzell, 1964). Prohibition and Klan revival reinforced their second-class status and, even in 1928, there was little chance of an Irish-Catholic such as Al Smith reaching the nation's highest office. Only with McCarthyism and Kennedy's election in 1960, as well as the social changes of the 1960s could an Irishman represent the all-American type. Even then, Irish actors such as John Wayne had to adopt WASP surnames to serve as 'all-American' archetypes.

In this sense, we need to interrogate the obsessive focus on boundaries (the spatial dimension of ethnicity) at the expense of collective narratives and iconography (the temporal dimension of ethnicity). Could it not be said

that the Irish only really became 'white' after 1960 or 1965? Alternatively, one could adopt a minimum definition of inclusion and go back to the abolition of the penal laws in the late 18th-century as the defining moment, if Catholic voting and citizenship are the keys to 'whiteness'. This highlights the multilevel nature of social inclusion, and the need for a more nuanced approach to questions of exclusion/inclusion.

What actually happened is that the Irish, who were always considered part of the broader 'white' race (even if poor cousins or 'white chimpanzees'), became equal and this was *occasionally* expressed using the term 'white'. This exposes the slipperiness of the 'white' concept, which alters its meaning according to the disparate ideas expressed by the various historical actors who utter this colloquialism. Surely scholars need to take a critical step back and differentiate its 'racial' and 'ethnic' meanings.

The previous discussion focused on what I believe are some of the limitations of an excessively constructivist, boundary-focused approach and the semantic conflation of two very different uses of the term 'white.' This raises the question of whether whiteness is malleable material in the hands of ideologues. In much of the literature on whiteness, we get the sense that whiteness is a hegemonic signifier with no relationship to the signified referent of white identity. This reflects some of the tenets of discourse analysis, which emphasizes the ways in which discursive strategies pave the way for rule by consent (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 1989: 34). This strategy opens the way for the claim that whiteness can be abolished (Roediger, 1991; Ignatiev, 1995). If white Americans could only understand that they are wearing the Emperor's New Clothes, they would wake up from their hegemonic stupor.

Notice that the White Studies argument turns on the notion that whiteness is a free-floating text. If only things were so simple. Here we need to return to a bit of critical reality: people's racial distinctions are real, even if there is little genetic basis to them. Just as people see discrete colours of the physical rainbow despite an electromagnetic continuum, we need to accept that they see colours (albeit with fuzzy boundaries) in the human rainbow despite a genetic continuum (Dawkins, 2004). This, much more than legal-technical distinctions, constitutes the social 'reality' of race. My ethnic background includes a quarter Chinese and a quarter Latin American, but I pass as white in both Europe and North America. Some of my cousins, with the same mixture, do not pass as white on either continent. What is happening is that people's pre-conscious 'auto-focus' tunes me in as white and my cousins as non-white.

Certainly matters might be different if White-Asian-Latinos were hegemonically scripted as 'non-white', but this kind of legal-technical detail has only occasionally mattered. We know that some individuals who 'appeared' white but had African ancestry were disenfranchised on the basis of the 'one drop rule' in certain southern states (Haney-Lopez, 1996).



But many white southerners have African ancestry and the vast majority successfully hid this through most of American history. In effect, the sting of non-whiteness (notably in the realm of politico-economic rights) largely applied to those who could not pass as phenotypically 'white'.

The same is true in cases outside the United States: Roediger may be right that Malcolm X may have been considered 'white' in the West African context, but it is a much bigger claim to say that West Africans did not physically distinguish between Malcolm X and George Wallace. We see this today in the attitude of the Nigerian government toward the light-skinned Colin Powell, whose views they disagree with, but whom they consider to be part of their wider racial group in a way that Donald Rumsfeld is not. Meanwhile, in South Africa under apartheid, Japanese businessmen may have been granted a 'white' designation on their identity cards, but this classification must surely be kept distinct from wider social meanings of the term 'white'.

This is not to deny some role for social construction when it comes to racial identity: those who are physically 'in-between' are to some extent up for grabs and can be excluded by the dominant group, but even here, a distinction is often made between the 'in-betweens' (i.e. South Italians) and the definite 'other' (i.e. black) racial group. Even if there were no sub-conscious basis for racial distinctions, we would still need to account for the historical power of racial collective representations. For instance, statues, film, portraits and photos all encode white iconic elements. To use Durkheimian terminology, these collective representations create a path-dependent 'social fact' – independent of power considerations – that is tied to white identity and not easily dislodged. This flags up some of the limitations of the boundary approach favoured by White Studies scholars, whereby boundaries shift rapidly in response to changing power constellations.

### ***Whiteness as ideology***

Is the white American myth-symbol complex an ideology? Only if we define ideology so broadly as to include all human cultural constructions and to thereby lose its lexical potency. Certainly, I would argue that narratives of both WASP dominant ethnicity and the more diffuse 'white' racial identity are analytically distinct from universalist ideologies of scientific racism – though the latter influenced the former from the late 19th-century until the mid-20th century (longer in the deep south). A lot of the argument turns on whether a Foucauldian or Gramscian logic operates, whereby an instrumental motive underlies white social constructions. Considerations of wealth, power and prestige are certainly important when it comes to explaining ethnic leadership or people's choice of identity. No doubt these motives made the choice of whiteness an easy one for the antebellum Irish.

However, people's identities also stem from romantic and traditional considerations (Smith, 1981; Ozkirimli, 2000). Cultural-historical traditions are predominantly anchored to *non-instrumental* motives. Leaders of such identity movements are often motivated by a yearning for authenticity, meaning or solidarity during periods of modern social upheaval. Their identity constructions are constrained both by a group's fund of available myths, symbols and memories and by the degree to which their constructions resonate with their target populations. Such resonance is only likely to be achieved when leaders appeal to elements within the repository of collective representations that have been handed down, in Durkheimian fashion, from generation to generation. In the American case, romantic currents of thought that glorified the pioneer, yeoman farmer and the symbols of rural America (including the Protestant church and school-house) were arguably central to WASP ethnonationalism (Smith, 1950).

The picture for the wider white American racial group is less clear. Traditions of how Europeans differed from the non-'white' world were hazier and even non-existent for some peasant immigrants. Therefore, the mass-cultural material that united all European-origin groups together as 'whites' (vaudeville, blackface, dime novels, film) leaned more heavily on negative stereotypes of the 'other' than in the WASP case, where romantic nationalist ideals were important. Instrumental considerations also bulked larger for white ethnics, who had a great deal to gain from their 'associate membership' in white America. Yet this does not invalidate the fact that whiteness was a real identity as well as a flag of convenience. There already existed a tradition of (pan-ethnic) white American identity that has grown more coherent over the past two generations through inter-faith marriage, 'white flight', cultural differentiation and growing racial diversity. Ideology *per se* was never the whole story and is less important for whiteness today than ever before.

### **White exceptionalism**

This points to a major inconsistency in the White Studies approach: its belief in *white exceptionalism*. Other racial categories are relatively authentic, but WASP and white are not; other groups are 'cultural', but WASPs or whites are culturally barren; other groups look to identity politics for cultural-historical reasons, but WASPs and whites do so for purely instrumental considerations. In asserting these patterns, White Studies scholars are perpetuating the very myth of white exceptionalism that led to the 'hiding' of white identity in the first place! This myth echoes the ancient Greek usage of the term *ethnos* or *barbaroi* whereby only cultural outsiders were considered 'ethnic.' This scholarly mindset has a very long pedigree in the United States. It explains why the term 'WASP' had to be coined by a Jewish-American outsider like Saul Bellow in the 1950s.

We should not deify white people. In the annals of human history, the strong politico-economic performance of light-skinned peoples is short, dating from no earlier than 1600. When whites lose their superior politico-economic position in the world, they will no longer receive reverential treatment in the developing world and will not be accorded the same status within western societies. Already, white Protestants in the United States are not viewed the same way they were only 50 years ago, and are occasionally seen as more 'backward' than the relatively urbanized, northern and successful white Catholics and Jews. This pattern is a harbinger of the future, when the urban American elite will be more racially hybrid than the traditionalist, economically precarious inhabitants of small-town and provincial America.

I am not joining the Polyanna-ish chorus of those who see an end to race in America (Roediger, 2002). Even with a hybridized elite, those with dark skins will face an uphill struggle to gain equality in their society. But power and wealth will become increasingly divorced from narratives of white authenticity, and we may well see a struggle between the purveyors of white nationalism (with their provincial base) and the modern, hybrid elite of the cities. Even the digestion of all white ethnics is problematic. Here I note that extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan have opened their gates to southern and eastern European groups, once derided as 'beaten breeds', but have not embraced even the blondest of Jews. As a result, I would contest the increasingly popular notion that the boundaries of whiteness will easily expand to include lighter-skinned Hispanics and Asians (Alba, 1990: 312; Gans, 1994: 588–9).

### ***Racial whiteness and wasp ethnicity***

At this point, we need to specify the difference between the white racial category, which is a *pan*-ethnic group, and the dominant WASP ethnic group, with its frontier narrative and rural-Protestant symbolism. These two are elided by White Studies scholars, but must be kept distinct. WASP ethnicity was a much richer construct and was more central to American national identity than the white racial category. Whiteness has well-defined boundaries, but is much more symbolically confused and opaque than WASPness. It lacks the 'native' authenticity that WASPness possessed, which makes its connection to nationalism problematic. Immigration led WASPs to employ both immigration restriction and anglo-conformity to retain ethnic boundaries. This was partially successful, but got stuck when Catholics and Jews failed to adopt the Protestant faith in sufficient numbers. WASPs might have contented themselves with a slower rate of assimilation and the maintenance of dominant minority status from the 1950s onward, but they did not.

Why? The reasons for the decline of the WASP had little to do with an

instrumental expansion of dominant group boundaries in the face of a threat from peoples of colour. The latter were too weak to pose any real challenge to WASP hegemony in the 1950s and early 1960s. Instead, the primary dynamic of change was liberalism: anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism waned during the mid-20th-century while American society became increasingly 'loose-bounded' (Bellah and Greenspahn, 1987). The trans-sectarian process that swept diverse American cities also affected homogenous locales from Oregon to the northwest of England. Elsewhere, I argue that when the WASPs began to lose their hegemony in the mid-20th-century, all minorities – religious and racial – improved their politico-economic position (Kaufmann, 2004a). There was no point at which reformers argued, 'Let us relax our religious boundaries while leaving racial lines in place.'

White identity always existed as a pan-ethnic category that mattered greatly for the boundaries of exclusion at the most basic levels of participation (labour, voting) in the United States. This racial identity did not, however, define the nation or determine who could lead, represent or narrate the nation – this being the preserve of the dominant WASP ethnic group. With a few exceptions, C. Wright Mills and Digby Baltzell were correct that the American power elite, presidents, congressmen, captains of industry, military and academic leaders, were WASP well into the 1950s (Mills, 1956; Baltzell, 1964). The decline of the WASP sparked a transitional period in which the white pan-ethnic group gained in importance. Liberalism, the subsequent reality of inter-ethnic marriage and urbanization started this shift, and the rise in the power and demographic strength of non-Europeans reinforced it. Even so, the coincidence of white identity with liberalism was merely momentary. 1960s liberalism leveled inter-faith barriers among whites, but simultaneously helped transcend the colour line that defined white identity, leading to a sharp rise in inter-racial marriage.

This time, it is less clear that white identity will tango with liberalism. White identity could embrace Catholics and Jews because these people fit in with whites' *gestalt*-psychological colour perceptions and their pre-existing white collective representations. Catholics and Jews were already nominal members of the white racial group in the days of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism, but Asians and most Hispanics are not even associate whites. A downplaying of religious identity and change of surname could even create an 'all-American' WASP out of a Catholic such as Rita Hayworth or Jew such as Kirk Douglas. This is unthinkable for an Asian or most Hispanics. On the other hand, Hayworth and Douglas's co-ethnics were not part of the dominant WASP ethnic group and, in the pre-1970 period, we need to distinguish between general white racial membership and the more exclusive and powerful WASP dominant ethnicity.

White exceptionalists have elided the distinction between racial whiteness and ethnic WASPness for some time. Consider the excellent work of

Thomas Gossett. This historian, like most of his colleagues in the 1950s and early 1960s, assumed that narratives of Anglo-Saxon origin and superiority in the United States were not ethnic but 'racial'<sup>3</sup> (Gossett, 1963). But are myths of genealogical origin 'racial'? Myths of origin and narratives of uniqueness *define* ethnic groups. Greeks look back to their classical and Byzantine ancestors, Turks to their central Asian forebears, Ukrainians to the Cossacks, Arabs to the Bedouins, Zulus to Shaka's original clan, the French invoke the Gauls and Franks, and Chinese hark back to the Chin and Han dynasties. All assert the positive qualities of their (supposed) ancestors. What is the difference between these constructions and 19th-century Anglo-Americans tracing their ancestry to supposedly superior, westward-wandering Anglo-Saxons? Only a patronising or parochial view of other ethnic groups could lead to Gossett's belief that, while others were exotically ethnic, WASPs were engaging in a racial power game. No, when we speak of Anglo-Protestant and now 'white' identity, we are not dealing with exceptional gods, but ordinary mortals who see the world as others do and have the same needs (and weaknesses).

## THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The previous discussion has touched mainly on criticisms of the White Studies approach to American ethnic relations. In the process, I have spoken of the need to distinguish race from ethnicity, and to balance a constructivist approach based on shifting boundaries with a historicist approach that takes mytho-symbolic path-dependence more seriously.

### *Limitations of time and place*

In this section, I argue that the White Studies approach has developed a number of limitations that derive from its American focus and methodological assumptions. The first concerns a parochialism in time, illustrated by White Studies' focus on the recent past of white power, which extends through to the post-civil rights context. This gives rise to a belief in white omnipotence when in fact a much simpler explanation is that we are living through a (temporary) period of light-skinned civilizational success that produces a 'psychic wage' for whites. Already, the once unassailable WASPs have given way to non-denominational 'whites' in the American power structure, and the racial hybrids are coming up behind them. When civilization was centred around the Mediterranean, China and India, light-skinned people were often enslaved and viewed as barbarians. This is why the word 'slave' is derived from the Slavs who were the source of slaves in the Byzantine and the Ottoman empire. Alistair Bonnett and others are

correct to point out that racial pseudo-science led to a hardening of racial boundaries, but this edifice was not constructed *ex nihilo*. It was rooted in a growing racial self-awareness that was bolstered by the strong politico-economic performance of north-western Europe. In the broad span of historical time, a few centuries is not much. Civilizations rise and fall and the dominance of light-skinned peoples is but one act in the long drama of human history. The loss of white prestige will make pretensions of white supremacy sound as hollow as ideas of Islamic superiority do today.

Perhaps more important than the limited time horizon of White Studies is its restricted appreciation of how ethnic dynamics operate outside the United States. This leads to an over-specification of the role of race in ethnic conflict and thereby hinders the applicability of ideas of whiteness outside the American context. One of the hallmarks of White Studies' thinking is its belief that the advantageous politico-economic position of whites in the United States is the result of a hegemonic ideology of white racism. No one can dispute the fact that scientific racism was a force in shaping American immigration policy in the 1920s – a policy that was not reformed until 1965. But was phrenology and eugenics central or was pseudo-science simply a legitimating device used by an anxious WASP ethnics that felt itself under siege from non-WASP immigrants? 'The nobility and dedication of the [racial] scientists ought not to obscure their human frailty', wrote the great American ethnic historian Oscar Handlin. 'Beyond the impressive array of tables and charts, set apart by the elaborate formality of their procedures, were men groping for an explanation of their condition' (Handlin, 1957: 111–12).

Here a glance outside the American context can yield a great deal of insight. The experience of Australia, Canada and Scotland suggests that racial concerns were secondary to ethnic considerations. Canada and Australia did bar non-white immigrants, but their ethnonationalists were mostly concerned with non-British immigrants (Palmer, 1975). In Scotland, a famous report from the Church of Scotland in the mid-1930s warned of the 'menace to the Scottish race' of continued Irish immigration. However, the term 'race' was a cover for ethnic and sectarian anxiety, used because scientific racism was deemed a more acceptable argument for restriction than religious bigotry (Bruce et al., 2004). Today, far-right parties in Europe from Flanders (Vlaams Blok) to France (Front National), Holland (Pim Fortuyn List) to Austria (Freedom Party) and most countries in between are primarily driven by the immigration restriction issue. Can 'whiteness' help us in understanding these processes?

I am skeptical. Most immigration-restriction politics is less concerned with instrumental politics or demonic visions of the 'other' than with maintaining the congruence of a particular ethnics and 'its' nation state. This has its roots in the Herderian, *völkisch* conception of the nation which has only a tenuous connection to modern scientific racism. Most nations were

constructed on the basis of a pre-modern ethnic core that provided the foundation myths, emblems and symbolic boundaries for the modern nation state. (Smith, 1986). In several other cases, such as the United States (WASP), Guyana (Creole) and Mexico (*Mestizo*), the dominant ethnic group formed after political independence (or revolution). Thus ethnicity and nation become ontologically and organically connected. In the minds of ethnonationalists, newcomers bring different cultural markers that need to be assimilated or rejected in order to remove the dissonance between ethnic group and nation.

### ***Race or ethnicity?***

Race only becomes central to ethnic conflict in specific cases, and recent large-scale comparative research shows that phenotypical differences are much less powerful than linguistic ones in explaining ethnic violence (Vanhanen, 2004). This is because most neighbouring ethnic groups look like each other. As noted at the outset, ethnic groups, by definition, require at least one diacritical marker to distinguish them from their neighbours. Race can serve as a marker of ethnicity, but will only do so in cases where groups come together as a consequence of long-distance migration (i.e. Mauritius, United States) or where such groups abut a major phenotypical boundary (e.g. the Himalayas or southern Sahara).

In cases where there are phenotypical differences, these may form central features of ethnic differentiation and, where one group dominates, they will tend to assert the superiority of their 'race'. Tutsi dominance over Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi; Arab dominance over Africans in Sudan, Chad or pre-1974 Zanzibar; Japanese dominance over the Ainu in Hokkaido: these are all instances of dominant ethnicity based on racial distinctions. The underlying sources of these 'racial' conflicts have to do with local ethnic dynamics rather than the broad racial classifications of racist ideologues. Certainly 'whiteness' plays no role.

In the western hemisphere, ideology has been more important in affecting the treatment of particular visible minorities (in some cases majorities) such as the Native Indians and Africans. This is because lines of culture and 'race' often cross, leading to racial divisions within cultures (i.e. black and white Brazilians) and transnational racial groups (i.e. Native Indians throughout Latin America). Meanwhile, the indigenoussness of the Native Indians complicated a simple 'nativist' response to minorities on the part of white *criollo* dominant groups. This means that there is more scope for broader racial studies approaches in the western hemisphere, about which I shall say more later. Even so, once the new states of the Americas were set up, *criollo* settler dominant ethnies formed and could respond in 'nativist' ethnic terms to new immigrants who threatened the imagined congruence of dominant ethnic group and nation.

In the United States, we see this in the case of the Native American/ Know-Nothing Party of the 1840s–60s and the multi-million member Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s (both were primarily northern, anti-Catholic movements). These shared a concern with the decline of the WASP dominant ethnic group. They were more concerned with the rise of Catholic power than they were with the exoticism of the ‘new’ immigrants from southern and eastern Europe or the ‘old’ racial minorities. Defending WASP America against the polyglot cities was the primary concern of congressional immigration restrictionists and was illustrated by the fact that the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which privileged racial ‘Nordics’ (including Irish and Germans), was superseded by pro-WASP legislation in 1929 that allocated 50 percent of the quota to Britain and excoriated Irish and German ethnic organizations as unpatriotic and self-seeking (Higham, 1988[1955]).

Likewise, in Canada, the primary concern of the dominant British-Canadian group as late as the 1960s was to encourage British immigration and discourage Catholic immigration. This was not because the Irish and French were not considered ‘white’. It was because the dominant ethnic group in the country wished to solidify its position. The same concerns inform the Singapore government’s selective immigration policy, which favours Chinese immigrants over Indians and Malays. In Vietnam and Malaysia, ‘Native’ Vietnamese and Malay attitudes to the Chinese are reversed, but for the same reason: dominant ethnicity.

Many postcolonial states are ethnically divided and internal migration raises similar issues to those of international immigration. For example, in Assam in north-eastern India, native Assamese express antipathy to Bengali and other in-migrants who greatly outnumber them in their homeland. In Northern Ireland, the formerly high fertility rate and eastward migration of the Catholic community has been a major ingredient in the Protestant ‘siege mentality’. Indeed, fear of being ‘swamped’ in one’s homeland is not limited to Enoch Powell or Margaret Thatcher: Philippine Muslims, Melanesian Fijians, Lebanese Christians, native-born South African blacks and numerous others express similar fears. This leads to an obsession with the census and with symbolic conflicts such as which language should be declared ‘official’ (Horowitz, 1985: ch. 4, 5). Both of these concerns have clear resonance in the European and American cases.

Another nation state that reflects the American experience is Jordan. As with the United States’s present-day pan-ethnic ‘whites’, Jordan’s dominant group is a pan-ethnic coalition of Transjordanian tribal groups, whose main shared identity is that they are not Palestinian immigrants. They maintain their hold on power by gerrymandering electoral boundaries and invoking their indigenous, ‘native’ rights as the dominant ethnic group. Throughout the Persian Gulf, immigrants who are not members of the dominant



tribal-Arab ethnic groups face restrictive citizenship regimes – not because of their appearance or because they are irrationally feared, but because they are not part of the dominant ethnic group that views the nation as ‘its’ organic possession.

In Europe and North America, the physical appearance of most immigrants differs from that of the dominant ethnic group, but not always. In Austria, ‘invisible’ East European immigrants are the main irritant for ethnonationalists. Likewise in Greece and Italy, where one would be hard-pressed to racially distinguish an Albanian immigrant. I am not convinced that the dynamic behind these cases differs greatly from cases where immigrant and ‘native’ look different. I am also unconvinced that such cases differ from the postcolonial cases described above. Pejorative stereotypes and racist fantasies can exacerbate tensions, but these conflicts have more to do with the desire of dominant ethnic groups to render ethnic and national boundaries congruent through immigration restriction or cultural assimilation.

It is important to distinguish between raw antagonism based on simple ethnic conflict and situations where historically charged stereotypes or Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor differences’ (e.g. Albanians in Greece, Jews in pre-war Europe) play a role (Goldhagen, 1996). Demeaning stereotypes of the Albanians in Greece, for example, add a negative charge to ethnic relations between the two groups. These stereotypes have historical roots and do not attach with the same force to North African immigrants. Nevertheless, the basic issue for ethnic Greeks in Greece is a slippage in the congruence of ethnic and nation. Furthermore, neither the ethnic conflict nor the ethnic stereotypes have much to do with Greek ideas of ‘whiteness’.

On the whole, therefore, a whiteness approach is too inflexible and parochial to allow us to understand the mechanisms that are driving anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural policies in the West. Following the analytical path laid by White Studies will, in the end, result in a partial and decontextualized explanation that inflates the importance of racial markers, racial power systems, racial fears of the ‘other’ and racial ideologies. Instead, I favour a more concerted attempt to interrogate the ethnic groups that claim national *legitimacy* and *authenticity*.<sup>4</sup> This means that greater attention must be paid to mapping the contours of dominant ethnicity within nations (Kaufmann, 2004b).

### ***The dominant ethnicity paradigm***

The dominant ethnicity approach recognizes that dominant ethnic groups are intimately linked to nations through shared foundation myths, boundary symbols and collective memories. This forms a centrepiece of Anthony Smith’s work on the ethnic origins of nations, but Smith fails to specify what happens when the modern nation takes over from its pre-modern ethnic

(Kaufmann and Zimmer, 2004). Dominant ethnicities do not simply die, but live in the shadow of the nation state they created. We need to know more about how dominant ethnic groups such as the Japanese in Japan, French in France or *pure laine* Quebecois in Quebec narrate their ethnic identities, which have until recently been inseparable from their national identities. This is the research agenda that lay behind my recent edited collection on this topic (Kaufmann, 2004b).

Smith's concept of the 'core ethnic' (1986) and later, 'dominant ethnic' (1991) is one starting point for analysis that concentrates on the *ethnicity* in dominant ethnicity, i.e. the cultural and ontological aspects of dominant ethnicity. A second heuristic emerges in the literature arising from Schermerhorn's (1970) more politico-demographic approach, which distinguishes between dominant majorities and minorities. This more explicitly examines the *dominant* aspect of dominant ethnicity. Donald Horowitz picks up on this thread when discussing ethnic power systems, especially in the postcolonial context (Horowitz, 1985).

Key to this discussion, therefore, are two ideas: indigenes and power. 'Native' indigenes provides the legitimating concept that aligns ethnicity with territory. Meanwhile, raw political power enables an ethnic group to achieve dominance within a multiethnic state. The right combination of both is necessary for a group to emerge as incontestably dominant. Thus in Guyana, the Creolized Africans emerged as the dominant ethnic because they could claim to be more 'native' than Asian Indians (descendants of indentured labourers who arrived after them) or European settlers. Meanwhile, their more rapid absorption into the culture of the colonists favoured them in the colonial power structure, while the more 'indigenous' Caribbean Indians did not have enough political power to contest Creole dominance (St. Hilaire, 2001).

We need to comprehend dominant ethnicity because it is increasing in importance in our time. This is so for two main reasons. First, the increase in global migration and cultural exchange, together with the rise of liberal-cosmopolitan norms among university-educated populations, is driving an ever-growing wedge between dominant ethnic groups and 'their' nations in the West. Nations – even if minorities like the Scots or Catalans – speak in terms of an inclusive, 'civic' nationalism rather than ethnonationalism. This means that nations are being separated from dominant ethnic groups, which are increasingly aware that their corporate existence is distinct from that of the state. This raises real identity problems that can express themselves in immigration restrictionist and anti-multicultural politics.

Second, outside the West, dominant ethnicity is increasingly salient because the end of the Cold War has prompted a collapse of postcolonial state unity. Nehru's India, Nyerere's Tanzania, Nkrumah's Ghana and Tito's Yugoslavia have succumbed to ethnic politics. Dominant ethnic groups such as the Hindus of India, Akan in Ghana or Serbs of the former Yugoslavia

face internal ethnic challenges while dominant ethnic parties increasingly appeal to a narrow ethnic base.

In the West, the growing divergence between dominant ethnies and 'their' ever more civic nations has heightened ethnic self-awareness among dominant groups such as the English in Britain, Portuguese in Portugal or 'Anglo-Celts' in Australia (Johnson, 2002). They increasingly realize that they are not the nation, and that the 'white' box (without prefix or suffix) on equal opportunities monitoring forms is a living, sub-state ethnic category. Some dominant ethnic groups may refer to themselves as 'white', or as having only a national (non-ethnic) identity, but we should treat such statements with caution. Loose talk of the English in Wales or Scotland as 'white settlers' or Protestant migration within Northern Ireland as 'white flight' needs to be similarly interrogated.

We need to probe deeper and understand why dominant ethnies behave as they do. Dominant ethnic groups often face the choice of an *expansive* or a *restrictive* ethnic strategy. An expansive strategy opts for power over culture/identity. For example, the Czarist-Soviet and Ottoman empires pursued territorial aggrandisement at the expense of their ethnic particularity – something that numerous Russian Slavophile intellectuals bewailed (Figes, 2001). This strategy had material benefits for the Russian and Turkish ethnic elites who ran these empires, but posed a threat to the integrity of the dominant ethnic group by fraying the vertical bonds between the ethnic elite and masses. Conversely, a second option is retrenchment, which maintains ethnic boundaries through immigration restriction and cultural purification (as with the attempt by romantic cultural nationalists to substitute invented words based on native roots for foreign borrowings). A restrictive strategy such as little Englandism or little Turkism often involves an inward-looking mode that foresakes growth (i.e. Empire) for cultural particularity. A 'third way' is the one favoured by the United States throughout much of its history: to maintain ethnic boundaries through assimilation rather than restriction.

National territories are ethnic homelands, thus national decisions affect dominant ethnic groups. Multiculturalism and civic nationalism may be opposing political theories, but they share a common indifference to the ethnies–nation link. Both relativize ethnicity and de-centre the dominant ethnies, thereby threatening its political dominance and its 'indigenous' connection to the ethnic homeland. These processes also weaken the dominant ethnies' control over cultural and personnel flows into the homeland. Finally, the cosmopolitan ethos of western liberal multiculturalism has the potential to transgress and corrode ethnic boundaries through large-scale inter-marriage. Taken at once, it spells disaster for ethnic dominance, hence it is not surprising that dominant ethnic processes explain most of the resistance to multiculturalism in the West. These processes are more about ethnic anxieties than racial fears.

Race is the principal marker that distinguishes dominant ethnics in the West from recent immigrants, though both religion and language are also important. In some cases (i.e. Greece), race is not even a marker of difference. Moreover, race itself is not so significant: the potential mass migration of East Europeans is almost as much of a concern to dominant ethnonationalists as immigration from the developing world. No major European dominant ethnic group will dissolve itself within a 'white' identity as has occurred in the United States. This is not because East Europeans are not considered 'white', but because they are not considered part of the dominant ethnic group. Ideological discourses of racism and stereotypes of the 'other' are certainly linked with social inequality, but they do not power the anxieties that drive 'Fortress Europe'. In short, dominant ethnic groups do not fear the cultural *difference* of the 'other' so much as the foreigner's potential to disrupt a perceived ethno-territorial continuity.

## THE ROLE OF RACIAL STUDIES

Where does this leave White Studies? Earlier, I argued that ethnicity cannot explain everything. This is particularly true when studying intra-ethnic or supra-ethnic conflict or when we are dealing with properties of societies that are arrayed along a continuum, but still count. These characteristics apply with force to race and status – which vary within societies but do not always constitute clear boundaries for social action. In the tropics and subtropics (Latin America, much of Africa, India and Southeast Asia), and even within the western diasporas of peoples of tropical origin, light skin is associated with higher social status, but does not neatly align with caste or racial group boundaries. Meanwhile, ethnic origin myths go back to European (i.e. Hindus), Turkic (i.e. Indian Muslims) or Semitic (i.e. Somalis, Lemba) ancestors. This has real consequences for human behaviour: population geneticists have recently demonstrated that higher castes in India have a significantly more European genetic profile than lower castes (Bamshad et al., 2001).

Why is this the case and what can be done about it? Pierre Van den Berghe, in trying to explain the preference for light-skinned women across a large sample of major civilizations, suggests that light skin is associated with fertility since a woman's skin lightens at the peak of the reproductive cycle and darkens with age. On the other hand, the two exceptions in Van den Berghe's model, Moorish Spain and the 25th Nubian dynasty of Egypt, show that social prestige may override the sociobiological imperative (Van den Berghe and Frost, 1986). Also, it is unclear that preferences in females automatically translate into a status system based on light skin. The rise of western racism (over and above the prestige factor of

light-skinned success post-1600) also has a role to play in elevating the white ideal in our time and a White Studies approach can illuminate some of these dynamics. This would need to involve more emphasis on the political mechanisms whereby ideologies of whiteness are translated into institutional rules. A racial studies perspective is also required in order to make sense of pan-ethnic movements like Negritude, White Supremacy or perhaps pan-Arabism, which are not easily encapsulated within ethnic studies approaches.

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that the concept of dominant ethnicity is a much more useful tool than whiteness when it comes to understanding majority responses to multiculturalism and immigration. I have pointed to what I believe to be a number of serious omissions in the White Studies approach, namely: (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*, which overemphasizes 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. The first four problem areas afflict existing White Studies approaches to American ethnic and race relations, while the latter casts doubt on the external validity of the White Studies perspective beyond the American case.

This does not mean that White Studies has led us down a blind alley. White Studies shone a much-needed light on areas that were crying out for examination. The empirical studies inspired by the whiteness approach form a rich, well-researched and innovative body of work. The writing of David Roediger is especially pioneering and is rooted in detailed analysis and solidly researched labour and social history. My argument is only that the time has come to place White Studies in its proper context. At a time when dominant ethnicity is becoming an increasingly prevalent feature of social and political life in all parts of the world, the White Studies approach cannot take us much further. Moreover, its tendency to both deify and castigate whites, combined with its more headline-grabbing statements (i.e. 'abolishing whiteness') tarnishes the political aim of eradicating the real ethnic and racial inequalities that exist in the present day. In this sense, the politics of White Studies often seems at odds with its methodology.

## Notes

- 1 Medical research suggests that racial and ethnic categories are not unimportant as predictors of genetic disease, but that there is far more variation within than between different ethnic and racial groups (Pearce et al., 2004). Dawkins adds that genetic variation within humans that is attributable to 'racial' divisions hovers at no more than 6–15 percent (Dawkins, 2004).
- 2 Likewise, one sometimes observes African or Native-Indian-Canadian Orangemen on parade in Belfast. An Irish Catholic would hardly be accorded similar status!
- 3 The elision of the two is clear in the shift of title between his PhD dissertation, 'The Idea of Anglo-Saxon Superiority in American Thought, 1865–1915' (1953), and the subsequent monograph based on his thesis, *Race, The History of an Idea in America* (1963).
- 4 Fragments of the whiteness canon allude to this, as with talk of the dominant group's 'myth of exclusive possession.'

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