

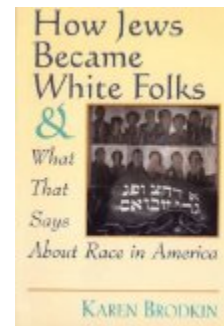
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Brodtkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. New Brunswick, NJ 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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How Jews Became White Folks is an engaging, provocative, and nicely written contribution to the expanding field of “whiteness studies,” and it raises questions that will be of interest to many urban historians. Anthropologist Karen Brodtkin is interested in the ways “our racial-ethnic background ... as well as our class and gender, contribute to the making of social identity in the United States” (p. 1), and particularly in the way “we construct ethnoracial identities ourselves ... within the context of ethnoracial assignment” by others. Her approach is both ethnographic and personal, and some of the best parts of her book consist of her reflections on the experience of her own family, and of her reports of sustained conversations with her parents. These personal touches should make parts of the book a model for reflection by others and an effective teaching tool.

The personal touches she includes also infuse Brodtkin’s discussions of theory with the reality of lived experience. “My sons, who did not grow up in a Jewish milieu, tell me they don’t really think of themselves as Jewish but rather as generic whites,” she writes. “When I asked my parents ... what they thought of that, they both gave me a funny look ...” (p. 3). Yet as she makes clear, Brodtkin’s parents, teachers who lived in the post-World War II suburb of Valley Stream, Long Island, defined their Jewish identities in ways that differed sharply from those of their own parents, who had worked in the garment industry and in small shops in Brooklyn. With these and other vivid vignettes, and with some striking discussions of both the personal experiences and of stereotypes of Jewish women, she makes it very clear that we construct our own identities in the historical contexts in which we find ourselves. She also makes an excellent case for the

notion that subjective identities are as historically contingent as are the “assignments” we encounter.

A second element of *How Jews Became White Folks* consists of Brodtkin’s personal and political reflections on several of the recent books on “whiteness” and related questions of race, class, and gender in American history. In these passages, Brodtkin reaches far beyond the experience of her own family and friends. Her perspective is consistent and clear. As she puts it in her conclusion, she argues that the United States parallels ancient Athens as a “democracy ... for the few, built upon the labor of those excluded from the circle of national democracy” (p. 176). The “logic underlying [this] construction of nationhood,” she adds, “has its historical roots in an economy and culture built upon slavery and expropriation. A kind of unholy trinity of corporations, the state, and monopolistic media produces and reproduces patterns and practices of whiteness with dreadful predictability” (p. 177). These are very broad claims indeed, covering a long span of time and many thorny issues. What exactly is the relation between colonial slavery and twentieth century corporations? What generalizations about the fragmented American “state” make sense? To what degree is “the media” “monopolistic,” now and at what points in the past? Is there no role for the agency of the ordinary citizen? Although Brodtkin devotes much of this short work to her claims on such matters, she provides here very little reason for the unconverted to accept them.

Regrettably, she also misses the opportunity to clarify exactly what she means by “whiteness.” Does she mean subjective self-identification with other people in a way that downplays what she calls “Euroethnic” identities, or

varied non-Protestant religious identities? Or a subjective self-identification as “not-colored”? Or does she mean self-identification with some set of “middle-class” views and aspirations? Much of her discussion of family conversations is along these lines. Or does she mean assignment by a vaguely defined business and political elite to a group that enjoys special privileges, as in her comments derived from works on “whiteness”? Does she also include assignment to such a group by members of a putative unified white Protestant middle class—the process Milton Gordon and Will Herberg described as “Anglo-conformity” over forty years ago? What of the assignment of Jews to one group or another by Catholics or descendants of Eastern Orthodox groups? Or by those who remain “people of color”? To what extent has it really been necessary to use racist strategies to get ahead in America?

Between the personal story of her own family and the untested metahistory of the “white nation,” Brodtkin offers a third story, the one implied by the title of her book. For this story she does adduce pertinent and persuasive evidence. She reviews some of the history of American antisemitism, the residential segregation, the use of quotas to exclude Jews from many colleges between 1910 and the 1950s, the refusal of many employers to hire Jews for many kinds of jobs as late as the 1960s. She recalls the anxieties raised by the decision to execute both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, by the attacks on writers and filmmakers, and McCarthy. She “is willing to affirm” the “ethnic heritage” belief that Jewish upward mobility since the 1950s “was due to our own efforts and abilities, reinforced by a culture that valued sticking together, hard work, education, and deferred gratification” (p. 26).

Despite her attractive loyalty to family tradition, Brodtkin rejects the triumphalism of much “ethnic” history and memory, insisting both that others created the conditions for Jewish success, and that the price of Jewish advancement was a willingness to embrace America’s oppressive racism. More important than self-help for Jewish success, Brodtkin insists, was the GI Bill, which she describes as “the most massive affirmative action program in American history” (p. 38). She also quotes Hasia Diner’s suggestion that Jewish participation in the civil rights movement allowed many to assert that they were more devoted to American ideals of liberty and equality than were many Protestants. Brodtkin does not develop this idea or discuss the ways in which many Jews, as well as many Catholics, benefited directly from laws and court decisions prompted by the civil rights movement. Nor does she really explore the degree to which it is fair to

accuse Jews as a group of racist attitudes today.

In any case, she views legislative and legal changes such as the G.I. Bill as strictly the product of calculations by “government and business leaders,” not as the response of Congress to pressures from the voters who fought—or members of whose families fought—in World War II. She ignores the extensions of the G.I. Bill in the Great Society and in the expansion of state systems of secondary and higher education, and she ignores the various policy cross-pressures set off by real revulsion against Nazi racism and the even more powerful pressures of the Cold War. Thus in her view Jews, like other recently “whitened” “Euroethnics,” owe their advances more to the business elites that “really” run America than to their own self-help and political action.

Those of us who are not persuaded that all key decisions in American life are made by a permanent power elite will not be willing to follow Brodtkin through the political assertions that underlie much of her argument. Many will lament her decision to ignore religious feeling entirely as the basis for thought and action by Jews and non-Jews alike: very many American Jews, even in New York, were deeply engaged in Orthodox lives or Conservative initiatives between 1890 and the 1950s and were deeply opposed to secularism and Marxism. (Brodtkin slights or ignores historians who take religious ideas more seriously than she does; her extensive and useful bibliography omits references to the centrally relevant works of Arthur Goren, Jeffrey Gurock, Thomas Kessner, Marc Rafael, and Harold Wechsler). Many students of labor markets, of the garment industry, and of retailing will reject her definition of “working class,” including the idea that all contractors and shopkeepers belonged to it. Contrary to her broad assertions, many Russian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants—like many Germans, Czechs, and others—brought with them to America commercially valuable business, technical, and linguistic skills as well as manual skills. The idea that New York’s Jews of the 1920s and 1930s can be divided almost entirely into a small business elite and a massive secular, left-wing working class would have astonished Fiorello LaGuardia and will persuade no one familiar with New York City’s history.

If Jews were in fact much more successful before the G.I. Bill than Brodtkin assumes, her premise that they enjoyed extraordinary success in the 1950s and 1960s requires reconsideration, and so does her explanation for whatever degree of success we might agree they enjoyed. If many Jews were politically conservative and engaged

in religious communities that looked inward in the 1920s and 1930s—and if various kinds of religious renewal are currently prominent in Jewish communities in the U.S.—her account of the “price” Jews have paid for success also needs reconsideration. Altogether, much of *How Jews Became White Folks* is more provocative than persuasive. But it presents its provocative ideas in engaging plain En-

glish, and is likely to be useful for a variety of teaching purposes.

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