



Erika K. Jackson. *Scandinavians in Chicago: The Origins of White Privilege in Modern America.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-04211-9.

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Immigrants from Scandinavia to the United States have generally been perceived as similar enough to the Anglo-American mainstream to have been exempt from the systematic discrimination that immigrants from many other regions have experienced. In the nineteenth century, Scandinavians settled throughout the United States, following the movement of the frontier, with noticeable concentrations in the Midwest, Utah, California, and the Pacific Northwest. Although they did not arrive in the United States as early or as in as large numbers as German immigrants, Scandinavians occupied a similar niche in the American imaginary in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as fair-skinned, hard-working Protestant Christians with funny accents. Yet while German immigrants suffered from nativist backlash after the outbreak of World War I, Scandinavians were, thanks to their home countries' neutrality in the conflict, for the most part able to position themselves as highly assimilated and loyal to the American cause. In fact, Theodore Roosevelt is said to have congratulated the Danish-born photographer Jacob A. Riis, "Your countrymen make the best Americans." The history of Scandinavian immigration and assimilation has been well-documented, with a particular focus on the largely rural settlements of Scandinavian farm families, but there are still many stories that

have yet to be told. Quite a few of them have to do with the significant urban communities of Scandinavians that emerged in such cities as Minneapolis, Seattle, and Chicago, which historian Erika K. Jackson focuses on in her book, *Scandinavians in Chicago: The Origins of White Privilege in Modern America*.

As the book's subtitle indicates, Jackson aims, rather than to simply document the trajectory and demographics of Scandinavian settlement in Chicago between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to contextualize these settlement patterns within the emergent discourses about race in the United States in the same period and connect them to our present intellectual moment. In the introduction, she declares her intent to explore "ideological, gendered concepts of Nordic whiteness and Scandinavian ethnicity employed by native-born Americans in Chicago during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to construct societal hegemony," in particular "the process by which Nordics became the embodiment of whiteness" (p. 5). She notes that much of the scholarship on American ethnic history has focused on "groups who fought for legitimacy, operating under the premise that those with uncontested whiteness required no further study" (p. 4). The author proposes to challenge normative whiteness by exposing the process by

which this racial hegemony was accomplished by means of analyzing media representations of Scandinavian Americans at the turn of the last century. The book thus pursues two quite distinct agendas, with varying degrees of success. Jackson's source material for the first area—the history of Scandinavian Americans in Chicago—is primarily the rich trove of newspapers produced by the Scandinavian American community, such as *Skandinaven*, *Svensk Amerikanaren*, *Svenska Nyheter*, and *Svenska Tribunen*, which Jackson mines for interesting anecdotes and statistical data very effectively. The predominance of Swedish sources reflects the disproportionate size of the Swedish community within the larger Scandinavian community in Chicago around the turn of the century, which is the period covered in greatest detail, but it would have enriched the book to include more substantive detail for the Danish and Norwegian communities as well.

For the book's second area of interest, racialized discourses that delineated whiteness, Jackson draws on some newspaper coverage but also relies heavily on contemporaneous pseudo-scientific publications, including Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), William Ripley's *The Races of Europe* (1899), and Joseph Deniker's *The Races of Man* (1900), which lent an air of authority to spurious theories about the genetic superiority of northern European peoples. Jackson attempts to connect these discourses with particular events in which Scandinavians in Chicago were prominent, such as the 1893 World's Fair, several high-profile murder cases, the so-called white slave trade, and the slapstick cross-dressing film series *Sweedie, the Swedish Maid* from the 1910s, in order to show how Scandinavians as a group both embodied and challenged racialized stereotypes. This second focus is more innovative in terms of existing scholarship on Scandinavian America, but it is also much more elusive than the historical chronology of Scandinavian settlement. Throughout the book, Jackson struggles to pull together a coherent argument that transcends the

fairly self-evident conclusion that being perceived as racially and culturally white was generally an advantage to Scandinavian Americans.

It is not entirely clear whose rhetoric and behavior Jackson is trying to analyze—that of non-Scandinavian Americans who constructed racial hierarchies that favored Scandinavians or that of Scandinavian Americans themselves. Her expressed hope of “emphasiz[ing] the significance of an intricate cultural interplay between native-born Americans and Scandinavian immigrants within the process of constructing Nordic racial hegemony” bodes well for engaging with both sides of this equation, but the remainder of the book does not offer much guidance as to whether Scandinavians are to be taken to task for “maintain[ing] racial hegemony” or commended for winning, somewhat arbitrarily, the public opinion vote on which European immigrants to favor (pp. 5, 9). Nor is it entirely clear how her observations about racial discourse in Chicago a century ago apply to contemporary American society. In the conclusion, Jackson tries to deconstruct race as a category entirely, in part by endorsing Rachel Dolezal's highly publicized outing as a white person who identifies as African American and exposing Donald Trump's claims about a fictional Swedish heritage, but she also seems to be scolding people who self-identify as Scandinavian Americans for embracing that heritage, arguing that “to be of Scandinavian descent in America is to claim a heritage that is untainted by an unfortunate history, unlike other northern European ethnic groups such as German Americans or Irish Americans. When Americans self-identify as Scandinavian, it is another way of noting structural advantage and race privilege and typically a source of self-pride” (p. 181). She repeatedly distinguishes between the terms “Nordic” and “Scandinavian,” with the former denoting allegedly racial characteristics of whiteness, such as skin pigmentation, head shape, and hair and eye color, and the latter indicating ethnic practices, from language to gender norms to food culture. Howev-

er, as she notes, just as the terms were used fairly interchangeably by both Americans and Scandinavians at the time, her own use of both terms is unsystematic, rendering the attempted differentiation between them fairly useless. Moreover, her observation in the conclusion that the term “Nordic” has fallen out of favor as a racial descriptor except among the white supremacist fringe begs the question of how to evaluate the widespread use of the term in professional contexts today, for example, in the transnational Nordic Council of Ministers, the Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the newly christened National Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, to give just a few examples.

The book is organized in a roughly chronological fashion that centers on the period from the 1890s to the 1920s. The introduction is followed by a chapter documenting the upward mobility of Scandinavian immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the wake of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Jackson has some difficulty keeping the focus on Chicago; she intersperses general observations about Scandinavian Americans with specific claims about Scandinavians in Chicago but does not always make it clear when those constituencies and their positionalities within American society diverged. Chapter 2 is particularly unsystematic, made up of several small sections about situations in which Scandinavians were subject to stereotyping that are interesting in their own right but are not treated within a coherent theoretical framework that would support the importance Jackson would like to attribute to them. Much of the chapter deals with Scandinavians in domestic service, which Jackson treats in much more depth and nuance in her excellent study of the Swedish maid phenomenon in chapter 3, though a more sustained discussion of how the popularity of Swedish domestic servants related to the northward migration of African Americans in Reconstruction-era America would have been appropriate. She offers some fascinating in-

sights into ways Scandinavians defied racial stereotypes in chapter 4, “Scandinavians Behaving Badly,” particularly with regard to the high rates of out-of-wedlock births among Lutheran Swedish women “who considered conception as binding as marriage” (p. 123). It is disappointing that, aside from a few passing references, she pays little attention to Scandinavian involvement in labor activism, which was significant in the early twentieth century, and does not even mention the Swedish International Workers of the World (IWW) activist and songwriter Joel Hägglund, better known as Joe Hill, whose ties to Chicago were so strong that after he was executed in Utah in 1915 for a crime he did not commit, the return of his ashes to Chicago occasioned citywide processions and memorial services. In her discussion of Scandinavian American protestations of loyalty during World War I in chapter 5, she makes a strong case for the segments of the Scandinavian American community that aligned themselves with the pro-war camp but does not give equal time to the widespread anti-war sentiment among segments of the Scandinavian American community, exemplified by the Rockford Swedes who refused the draft. Her discussion of the effectiveness of Scandinavian attempts to prove their loyalty to the United States during the war would have benefited from some mention of the infamous “Babel Proclamation,” issued by Governor William L. Harding of Iowa on May 23, 1918, which outlawed the speaking of foreign languages in public in that state. Chapter 6 addresses the emergence of a Scandinavian country-club class in the 1920s, but the author’s framing of this highly socioeconomic development as a racialized phenomenon is unpersuasive. The chapter focuses almost exclusively on the Nordic Country Club founded in Itasca, Illinois, in 1925-26 but fails to support the assertion that the club benefited “Scandinavians as a whole” (p. 157). This chapter also makes the rather perplexing and unsupported claim that the very limited inclusion of female relatives of members in the club illustrated “that Scandinavian

men still exuded an image of old-world piety, and even in the modern era, members of the Nordic Country Club continued to hold onto their moral beliefs despite the introduction of modern social mores” (p. 163). Surprisingly, the Swedish-founded North Park University warrants only a single sentence, despite its crucial importance in facilitating the rise of Swedish students into the educated middle class in this same period.

While Jackson’s book makes a very welcome and thought-provoking contribution to the study of both Scandinavian America and the social construction of whiteness, it does not, disappointingly, fully realize its potential. In focusing on “immigrants who were able to attain success because they did not encounter roadblocks reserved for other groups,” Jackson aims to expose the “powerful set of myths that were set into motion by American culture, historical study, and political agenda,” which is a goal both timely and ambitious (pp. 7, 8). The impressive historical material and insightful thematic analysis she musters in the service of this cause is, however, frequently obscured by inconsistently applied methodological and theoretical tools. Moreover, the profusion of malapropisms and inscrutably phrased sentences throughout the book are highly distracting and cry out for editorial correction. Finally, although the book is well equipped with endnotes, it does not contain a separate bibliography, either of the newspaper articles or academic work, which would have been useful to other scholars. These flaws in no way negate the book’s value as a case study of urban Scandinavian Americans and the ways the media shaped the public perception of them as a group, but they do make it harder to use it effectively for research or in a classroom setting.

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