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Critical Whiteness Studies and the “Jewish Problem”

The “whiteness” of Jews has recently become a popular topic both in public debates and in academic research (Critical Whiteness Studies). Within this discourse, “whiteness” is used as a critical concept denoting those who enjoy white privilege in American and other Western societies. However, attributing “whiteness” to Jews is more than controversial, for it assimilates the most persecuted minority in European history to the dominant majority, while downgrading the significance of antisemitism. This is a necessary move in order to reaffirm and critically address the fundamental nature of the black and white divide; however, it is questionable both methodologically and politically.

Debates about Jewish whiteness

Recently, there have been several debates in American newspapers and in the Jewish and Israeli press about whether “Jews were white.” For sure, the basic issue here is the meaning we attach to “whiteness” when attributing it to Jews, and the reason for doing so. Why should there be such debates? Furthermore, why does this topic seem to be so popular, and what are its stakes? The “whiteness” of Jews can be approached from two fundamentally opposing points of view, which entail two different meanings of whiteness. And even though the two meanings are linked, their respective usages are very different. The first usage is descriptive or interpretative, whereas the second is critical (these two are summarized with a special emphasis on the first, but not sufficiently distinguished from each other, by Green 2016b).

From the first perspective, the question posed is whether Jews are still considered part of the nation, particularly in the American context, in a time when, under the Trump presidency, the Alt-Right has gained significant influence. Is there any risk that antisemitic voices and actions will become legitimate yet again? Can Jews be singled out by antisemitic movements once again as “aliens” corrupting white America? In this perspective, questioning the whiteness of Jews would amount to questioning their integration into U. S. society, while reaffirming it would mean to resist white supremacist antisemitism.

The second view, which is now more important for our purposes, tries to establish that Jews, at least Ashkenazi Jews, constituting the majority of American Jewry, are unquestionably white, as they enjoy a stable place in the white majority. However, it is precisely this stable attribution of “whiteness” that poses a problem, for it reflects an intention to demonstrate that Jews, in spite of their former status as an ethnic and religious minority, have come to occupy powerful and dominant positions in society. For sure, when talk about Jewish whiteness is meant to establish that Jews are part of the oppressive majority, it is a more or less overtly critical way to address the role of Jews, which can be considered a new way of posing the “Jewish problem”. For if Jews are white in this sense, they are attributed all the privileges the white majority can enjoy, and are thereby excluded from the multicultural space of other, supposedly dominated, ethnic groups. From this perspective, it is the case that a once oppressed minority has gained acceptance in majority culture and society and thus become part of the dominant and oppressive majority. The discursive situation in which this peculiar minority group finds itself is well summarized by Sander L. Gilman:

The curse of all promises is that they are realized: the Jews enter into the world of the multicultural and become successful within it. Thus, they become the new ‘establishment’ when, by the 1960 s, other groups in Germany, France, Britain, the United States, and South Africa begin to seek their multicultural space. The trajectory of the image of Israel from the embattled, overwhelmed, rescued fragment of European Jewry to “Super-Jew” and then to “racist” archvillain parallels this cultural tale (Gilman 2006, p. XIII).

As is clear from the hint given here, this kind of image of Jewish whiteness is often further reinforced by the conception of “intersectionality,” which posits the interconnected nature of all dominated positions and which thereby links Israel to Jewish whiteness and domination: a firm, if imaginary, relationship is established between the state of Israel and the supposedly dominant role of “white Jews” in the U. S. In this kind of discourse, the U. S. represents an empire of “interlinked systems of white supremacy, imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy” (Green 2016a). Thus, Jews can be presented as white dominators in the Middle East, colonizing the autochthonous non-white Arab population. By analogy, the color line is introduced into conflicts which have nothing to do neither with the American race relations, nor with a European type of colonialism.

Interestingly enough, this view has equally been echoed and perpetuated recently for example by voices at a national gathering of “Jews of color,” reported on sympathetically by the Forward (Gabriel 2016). The participants at this meeting, or at least the majority voices, expressed the intention of tracing the color line even inside the Jewish community, by separating the Ashkenazi Jews, those of “European extraction,” from all the others. Ashkenazim are white, therefore privileged, whereas Sephardic and Mizrahi “Jews of color” are oppressed both in the U. S. and Israel, suffering essentially the same lot as the Palestinians. The assertion is not only that the division between white and non-white should be relevant in the interpretation of privilege and domination universally; but more importantly, that these phenomena should be conceived exclusively in terms of color. The antisemitic phenomenon, under its various forms appearing in human history, is completely excluded by this imaginary division of Jewry, as, according to the participants, “anti-Jewish oppression itself replicated an Ashkenazi view of anti-Semitism”, and as “our prevailing concept of anti-Semitism is a European construct” (Gabriel 2016). Therefore, by extension, Israel is equated with this kind of Euro-American whiteness:

We Mizrahim have so thoroughly internalized the message that it’s bad to be Arab—which is not a race, but is often used as a racial signifier indicating ‘brown’—that we now erase and demean that part of our identity with no outside prompting. Between early Zionism’s attempt to define Jews as ‘us’ and Arabs as ‘them,’ and America’s systemic war against brown and black bodies, we’ve unwittingly bought into the idea that Jewish = non-Arab. I wanted to reject this idea, to inhabit both identities—Arab and Jewish—with pride (Gabriel 2015).

Antisemitism is mentioned practically nowhere, or is downgraded and relegated to the background, as if it were not relevant any more. For sure, it has to be downgraded and minimized, because it would supposedly weaken the criticism conducted in favor of the “really oppressed,” which the Jews are not. Linda Sarsour, the “new face of intersectional feminism,” who had also been invited to the “Jews of color” gathering before she participated in the panel on antisemitism at the New School for Social Research, was very clear on the subject. Speaking in a video published by the Jewish Voice for Peace, she said: “I want to make the distinction that while anti-Semitism is something that impacts Jewish Americans, it’s different than anti-black racism or Islamophobia because it’s not systemic. [...] Of course, you may experience vandalism or an attack on a synagogue, or maybe on an individual level... but it’s not systemic, and we need to make that distinction” (Shire 2017). Here, Sarsour implies that first, it is not a collective or structural phenomenon, but the sum of scattered individual acts, and second, and more importantly, that antisemitic attacks carried out by other minorities (which is most often the case) cannot be significant, for those are not the actions of the dominant (white) groups, who determine the permanence of structural racism. The theoretical underpinning of this view, besides “intersectionality,” comes from a theory of structural racism:

[...] the question needs to be rephrased from ‘are blacks as ‘racist’ as whites?’ to ‘are blacks as ‘prejudiced’ as whites.’ I do so because the concept of ‘racism,’ as used by most social scientists and commentators, is grounded on methodological individualism (the separation of ‘racist’ and ‘nonracist’ individuals) and psychologism (assuming ‘racist’ individuals are pathological, whereas those who are not ‘racist’ are normal). In contrast, I have attempted to conceptualize racism as a sociopolitical concept that refers exclusively to racial ideology that glues a particular racial order. Thus, I have suggested that color-blind racism is the ideology of the ‘new racism’ era. My answer, then,

to this rephrased question is that any race (or ethnic group) can be 'prejudiced' against any other race or races (e. g., blacks can be anti- Jewish and Jews can be antiblack) (Bonilla-Silva 2006, pp.173–4).

However, there are still authors who think that antisemitism is not analogous to racism, and according to whom only an extremely myopic view could assimilate the two. This important distinction, already drawn by Horkheimer and Adorno in the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” (Adorno-Horkheimer 2002), has lately been reformulated by the writer and blogger John-Paul Pagano, who rather convincingly contested the relevance of attributing skin privilege to Jews:

For one, color bias is an insignificant factor in the history of Jewish persecution, so foisting 'white privilege' on Jews is parochial—it shoehorns centuries of Jewish suffering into the particular American experience of racism, which centers on anti-black bias. But more important, anti-Semitism doesn't work like most forms of racism, which denigrate their victims as inferior. Anti-Semitism is special in that it often perceives its target—Jews—as having too much privilege and assails them for it. Unlike racism, whose modern versions stem from 19th-century pseudo-science, anti-Semitism is a conspiracy theory and at root all conspiracy theories envision a demonic elite oppressing and exploiting the common people (Pagano 2016).

Another ongoing debate worth mentioning was sparked by the lead role played in the film *Wonder Woman* by the Israeli Gal Gadot (see Mueller 2017, Berlatsky 2017, etc.). Was the lead role played by a woman of color or by a white woman? The trouble with the argument asserting Gadot's whiteness is that it relies at least on two very different and even contradictory understandings of the notion, one we Critical Whiteness Studies and the “Jewish Problem” 89 could term “perceived whiteness” and the other “cultural whiteness” (including many subtypes). The choice of which meaning should be used depends on its capability to bolster the argument in a given context. The journalist arguing for the whiteness of Gadot says:

[...] the truth is that whiteness isn't a biological or historical truth; it's a fuzzy, culturally determined category that has fluctuated widely over time. At various historical moments and in various places, Irish people, Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans, and, of course, Jews, have been excluded from the category of 'white people.' [...] In this context, the best definition of white people is simply 'people who are considered white.' Gadot's nationality was not a secret; she wasn't passing as something other than Israeli (Berlatsky 2017, 5–6).

So far, this is the story in a nutshell we could learn from the historical writings of Critical Whiteness Studies (see below). Once upon a time there used to be also antisemitism among other types of racisms, but it gradually faded away as Jews became more and more culturally and socially integrated, and by metaphorical extension, “white”. But then, the author goes on to assert that “[...] in Israel itself, Gadot's skin color and European background protect her from the kind of discrimination faced by Ethiopian Jews, other dark-skinned Jews, and Palestinians”. So again, Jewry as an ethnic or religious group ceases to exist, therefore antisemitism cannot exist either. The color line introduced into the Jewish ethnic group itself, along with the assertion of its essential exclusivity, that is, the division of Jews according to color (perceived whiteness), ultimately denies the relevance of antisemitism. However, the contradictory elements—whiteness as cultural and social position and whiteness as skin color—rhetorically reinforce each other, resulting in the image of the Jew as both the conformist or even the dominator in his own society, and as the colonizing white man in Palestine. Fortunately, there are also “good Jews”, those whom we perceive as non-white, suffering not only from white privilege as such, but most particularly from their own fellow white Jews, and never with them, therefore never from antisemitism.

Critique and Whiteness Studies

All the arguments of the aforementioned debates stemming from whiteness as a critical concept can be found in the academia, namely in the emerging fields of Critical Whiteness and Racism Studies. Over the past twenty years or so, in American scholarship on racism, with ever growing intensity, it has become fashionable and even mainstream to assert that Jews are white, that is, that they belong to the dominant majority. This means, that as a collective, due to embedded

racialized structures in society, they benefit from their dominant position and are complicit in oppression; while, in a somewhat twisted manner, they are sometimes taken to be complicit in oppression also as individuals (now the tide has reached Europe as well, even if the black and white dichotomy is far less evident there, see Traverso 2013).

Critical Whiteness Studies have been promoted as an activist scholarship; according to its self-definition, its task is questioning, and de-essentializing whiteness. It seeks to question whiteness being the default color, as “neutral”, contrasted to people of color. The intention, according to Ruth Frankenberg, is to “displace the ‘unmarked marker’ status of whiteness, a continued inability to ‘color’ the seemingly transparent white positionings.” Even in previous critical analyses of racism, she claims, “whiteness remains unexamined—unqualified, essential, homogenous, seemingly self-fashioned, and apparently unmarked by history and practice” (Frankenberg 1997, p. 1). This is an enterprise which, in itself, could certainly yield some important and new insights into racism, and even deconstruct some of its mechanisms.

“Revealing the ways in which whiteness functions as a racial norm, they began to denaturalize it and thereby rob it of some of its power to order thought and practice” (McWorther 2005, p. 534). The deconstruction of the supposedly neutral and essentialized category “white” is often arrived at by writing the social history of whiteness: the way Italians, Irish, Russians and other East-European nationalities have become white in the U. S., against the backdrop of the persistent racial discrimination of the black population.

Critical Whiteness Studies offer a type of research that makes use of sociological tools as well as historical ones. Sociology, as a reflexive science of society, is necessarily related to criticism. Sociology, or social science in general, cannot be a completely neutral and objective enterprise, striving solely to describe or explain. However, social scientific analysis might have a tendency or even an ambition to become exclusively critical, in which case it is susceptible to ignore its scientific tasks of explanation and description (see, for example, Boltanski, 2009, Trom 2011). Therefore, a fair balance should be found between the scientific and the critical intention. The problem is not that Critical Whiteness Studies pursues a certain political agenda; but rather, that it subordinates the empirical analysis to its critical vocation. This is the reason why, as I will try to show, its politics regulates its methodology and predetermines its empirical findings to a large degree.

In turn, this type of totalizing criticism is responsible for the emergence of the “Jewish problem” with regard to questions of whiteness and race. For sure, this branch of research constitutes only one example among many contemporary works of social and political criticism, in which the “Jewish question” reappears.

This emergence can be attributed to the fact that many critical approaches regard the memory of the Holocaust as an obstacle to criticism. There is a perceived relationship between the Holocaust and the social question: the Holocaust seems to downgrade the suffering of other people, as if there were only a limited amount that could be distributed (Trom 2007). But we could also add that some obstacles are equally constituted by the antisemitic phenomenon itself. It seems that Jews and the antisemitic phenomenon are somehow disturbing factors in the way of the great expansion of social and political criticism, which aims to concentrate on extremely few aspects of domination and violence.

“Whiteness” in Critical Whiteness Studies is meant to express a position of domination. Therefore, it is neither a descriptive nor simply an interpretative but a critical concept, meaning that whoever is found to be white enjoys white privilege. This is to say that the white individual, merely by his social position, practices racism and discrimination; therefore, he does not need not be racist himself, as he automatically benefits from racially marked social structures and perpetuates them. He partakes in social but also economic oppression, against minorities, that is, people of color. As Bonilla-Silva puts it:

Although specific whites may not have participated directly in the overt discriminatory practices that injured blacks and other minorities in the past, they all have received unearned privileges by virtue of being regarded as “white” and have benefited from the various incarnations of white supremacy in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 81–82).

Therefore, assimilating Jews to whiteness conceived in this manner is not innocent social history, but reveals a clear political ambition: it has to be proven that the fundamental racial issue is linked to the color line between whites and blacks, while everything should be considered negligible. Ethnic identities, differences, controversies between ethnic groups, and discrimination on any other basis than color should be considered as insignificant in the light of the plight of the black population. The particular traits of antisemitism, that is, everything that renders it different from racism, becomes irrelevant. In fact, one of the main methodological principles of Critical Whiteness Studies dealing with Jews and Jewish assimilation, even if it remains implicit or unstated, is the interpretation of antisemitism as just another form of racism. However, this tacitly applied methodological principle is converted into an empirical finding: as if the history of Jews in the United States followed the pattern of assimilation of every other “white” minority ethnic group. Once each and every one of them were discriminated against (because non-white or “less-than-white”), but eventually they became integrated into the dominant white majority. People who are now considered “white” do not have to endure racism any more, for they are meanwhile placed on the safe side of the color division. As Jews have also become white, there cannot, by definition, be any discrimination against them, or if there is, it cannot be “systemic”, that is, meaningful.

Whiteness and the Jews

The latest in the series of the type of social history narrating the construction of whiteness is the story of the Jewish immigrants to the United States, the pioneering work of the field being Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks? It Has Become a Classic, widely cited and rarely criticized work by authors taking up the study of Jews and whiteness.*¹

In this book, the “whitening” of Jews is related as social history. It reads as follows: Jews were discriminated against for a relatively short time period, mostly in the 1920 s and 1930 s, but this belongs to the past. Jews were not always considered “white”, but they became white in a process that lasted for several decades. However, it is far from evident, and nowhere empirically proven, that the basis of their discrimination was “color”. As Kolchin puts it: “What is at issue is not the widespread hostility to and discrimination against the Irish, Jews, poor whites, and multiple other groups, but the salience of whiteness in either explaining or describing such hostility and discrimination” (Kolchin 2002, p. 164). However, this should not bother Whiteness scholars, for they apply a reverse logic: as in the characterization of present-day society structural white supremacy is presupposed, all groups should be placed under its regulatory power, even “historically.” Now, the problem is that color does not designate skin color, for it is susceptible to change constantly: the task of whiteness studies is precisely to demonstrate its historically changing nature, its dependence on the contextually shaped perception; therefore, it can only be understood metaphorically, in that it is metaphorizing dominant status, prestige, middle-classness in a given society. This metaphor can hide a lot of heterogeneous things; however, the notion of “whiteness” constantly falls back to skin, that is, something much more (although not entirely) tangible and objective, creating a line which is, evidently, insuperable for black-skinned people. This duplicity of the concept is responsible for its fluid and ever-changing, and at the same time absolutely constant, nature.

Also, when authors talk about the color line separating whites and blacks, color gains a much more literal significance. For if white privilege is mostly skin privilege in everyday situations (see the classic formulation in McIntosh 1989), that is, being perceived as white, passing as white,

¹ However, one important criticism is yielded by Eric L. Goldstein (Goldstein 2006), a work inspired by whiteness studies, but going well beyond its ideological and methodological limitations.

then historical deconstruction of whiteness does not really help, for individual Europeans, let them be Irish, Italians or Jews, but also many Middle-Eastern Jews and Arabs, will be perceived as white regardless of social history. So far, the relationship between whiteness as metaphor of dominant status (middle-class, mainstream, high volume of educational capital, etc.) and whiteness as skin color has not been meaningfully clarified; but we could have the feeling that the analysis falls back on skin color as default whenever the essential nature of the color line has to be demonstrated.

In Brodtkin's account, Jews are not discriminated against in the U.S. any more, and have benefited from post-war policies given only to whites; that is, Jewish success, in spite of their common belief, is something that they do not "deserve," it is owing not to their individual or collective merit, but to discriminatory practices against other minorities which they supposedly benefited from. Brodtkin, in an utterly subjective vein, cites her father, who thought that Jews were exceptionally talented. In the author's family they recurrently told "the myth that Jews pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps" (50). However, everything came about with the help of the federal government: "Jews and other white ethnics' upward mobility was due to programs that allowed us to float on a rising economic tide" (Brodtkin, p. 51). But then, what are the elements in this story that pertain to the particular Jewish history in the U. S.? Obviously, not so much. "I tell this story to show the institutional nature of racism and the centrality of state policies to creating and changing races [...] I tell the story in a way that links anti-Semitism to other varieties of anti-European racism because this highlights what Jews shared with other Euro-immigrants" (Brodtkin, p. 27). The story of the Jews becoming white is evidently modeled on the story of the Irish going through the same procedure a little earlier (see Roediger 1991, Ignatiev 1995). Nonetheless, it lacks the historical detail and precision of the other "story" (even if it is questionable also with regard to the Irish, if color was the main element in their discrimination during the 19th century, see Kolchin 2002, p. 163–4).

But in her story, Brodtkin does not highlight what Jews did not share with the Irish, Italians, Russians, etc., like, for example, their exceptionally high educational status, or, more importantly, the persisting antisemitism which cannot be considered insignificant even now. Antisemitism is relegated to the background, or, rather, to the past: it is treated as something irrelevant to the present American context. As Matthew Fry Jacobson puts it: "Despite its capacity to absorb and adapt unique, long-standing anti-Semitic notions of Jewish greed and the like, the racial ideology encompassing Jewishness in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century did set Jews on a social trajectory similar to that traveled by many other probationary "white persons"" (Jacobson 1999, p. 179). However, antisemitic violence is still present, and it is responsible for the majority of religiously motivated attacks even in the U. S. (which, I shall add, in case of Jews, would be hard to distinguish from racial motives).²

The peculiarity of this narrative becomes evident when we examine it from the perspective of European social history. It is interesting to note that liberal-minded European social and intellectual history in the last forty-fifty years has always celebrated Jewish assimilation, and Jews as torch-bearers of modernity. This kind of historiography was significant against the backdrop of the recent virulent antisemitism from the end of the 19th century on to Nazism, culminating in the Shoah. Jewish universalism, meant both their assimilation to the different nation states and national cultures, and their partaking in capitalism and modernity. In many ways, this was a kind of counter-discourse to that of the conservative anti-modernists' between the two wars. European conservative and *völkisch* thinkers, especially in Eastern Europe, claimed that industrial and commercial capitalism, epitomized by the figure of the "Jew," destroyed traditional social structures and proved alien to the lives of the autochthonous population.

Now, while in post-war European social history Jews were synonymous with progress and universalism, Critical Whiteness Studies introduced a very different perspective. Karen Brodtkin tacitly, and at times quite overtly, asserts that the whitening of the Jews took place to the detriment of blacks, or even, that Jews used blacks to assert their own whiteness. However, this

² See the 2017 FBI statistics on hate crimes: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2016/topic-pages/victims>

argument is nowhere developed systematically. Brodtkin mentions public intellectuals and sociologists, who happened to be Jews describing American society and the roles of blacks therein in a supposedly racist manner, or with a racial bias (but ultimately, there is only one figure, Nathan Glazer, about whom she talks at length). She is citing some of the works by conservative or liberal cultural critics, who sometimes happen to be Jews, and who seem to convey racial stereotypes in their works. But they are certainly not racist towards blacks, even if the scientific concepts they rely on might be racially biased or at least controversial. It is sufficient to open almost any book in applied sociology (social work, criminality, education, etc.) to see that these culturalist and psychological assumptions are widely employed in these fields. Assumptions which could well be suspected of applying a middleclass and institutionally minded bias (related to the formation of concepts in these fields, and much less to the individual authors), but much less a racial one. (To be sure, within the Whiteness Studies framework, where all domination is ultimately racial, these distinctions cannot be made). But even if these works should be called racist, it would certainly be absurd to infer a “Jewish” stance here, only because some of the authors working in these fields are Jews.

Jews became the “interpreters of white America in the 1950s”, says Brodtkin, meaning America as such, but which is also a racially marked America (Brodtkin 1999,143). According to her, the rise of ethnic pluralism instigated a type of Jewish whiteness “by contrasting Jews as a model minority with African Americans as culturally deficient” (Brodtkin 1999, 144). Therefore, as paradoxical as it may sound, Jews reinforced white supremacy. By their own success as a minority group, and their own ideology, based on “merit,” they highlighted the fact that blacks were not successful. Thereby, it is possible to conclude that they were instrumental to modern capitalism, in which, at least in Brodtkin’s frame (“the racial metaorganization of American capitalism”, p. 178), racial discrimination is supposed to be essential.

But again, not only does she barely mention the role of Jews in, for example, the civil rights movement; she practically does not yield any proofs that a particular Jewish success really depended upon the economic and symbolic oppression of blacks. Even if whites (all ethnics confounded) succeeded “on the backs of blacks” (coinage by Toni Morrison), by an “affirmative action for whites”, meaning several housing and educational benefits after the war, and even if Jews could benefit from it as well, there is no specification concerning these latter: this is not Jewish history in America, but the history of people of European origin “becoming white.” “The construction of Jewishness as a model minority is part of a larger American racial discourse, in which whiteness, to understand itself, depends upon an invented and contrasting blackness as its evil (and sometimes enviable) twin” (Brodtkin, 1999, p. 151). Or, again: “For white ethnics to claim their whiteness would seem to depend upon denying equal entitlements to nonwhites” (154). Even if Brodtkin’s general judgement were true (which is not peculiar to her work, for it is one of the main theses to be found across the whole field of Whiteness Studies), it would still say nothing specific about Jews. In Jacobson’s formulation, which is intentionally unspecified: “it is not just that various white immigrant groups’ economic successes came at the expense of nonwhites, but that they owe their now stabilized and broadly recognized whiteness itself in part to these nonwhite groups” (Jacobson 1999, p. 9).

As others have pointed out (Kolchin 2002), the meaning of “whiteness” is far from evident in these studies. For example, the process Brodtkin describes with regard to American Jewry seems to be merely one of becoming middle-class by attaining a certain standard of living and identifying with middle-class culture (although not thoroughly). Brodtkin calls the end of the process the acquisition of whiteness for Jews. But the tag “white” is completely superfluous, for it is only supposed to symbolize, or only metaphorize, middle-class status for people who, most of the time, are perceived as white and therefore supposed to enjoy “skin privilege.”

However, it is not superfluous at all in a political sense: as has been said before, it is destined to criticize those groups which are becoming white, thereby getting hold of all undeserved privileges the dominators enjoy. It seems there could be no subsequent action which newly integrated

groups, and especially Jews, could take to respond satisfactorily to such criticism. What is to be done? How should one distance himself from a newly acquired status (which is doubtful enough in itself)? The problem is that the liberation from race and whiteness is conceived of in individualistic terms that do not fit the original framework. It is somewhat perplexing to attribute unitary attitudes and clear-cut intentions to a whole ethnic group to be duly denounced. A theory of structural racism would logically entail that any accusation conducted against an ethnic group is ill-founded. Brodtkin tries to back up this individualistic turn with heterogeneous and unconvincing remarks in order to make room for a certain Jewish “responsibility” in exploiting their newly gained whiteness. For example, she diagnoses a conservative turn among Jewish intellectuals, saying that “they had no desire to return to the ghetto or to join any struggle against capital” (153). Additionally, she pictures Jewish intellectuals as “arrivistes” whose position was insecure, thereby comparing them to “racist white workers.” She says that Jews working in Hollywood were promoting bourgeois ideals in films. Of course, this individualistic fallacy is very common in the field. For example, the “race traitors,” Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey “imply that white people can just put down their knapsacks [of privileges] and stop being white and that will bring racism to an end. In fact, they suggest that white people can become black” (McWhorter, 2005, p. 551). By the same token, what could have been the alternative for Jews, instead of becoming “white”? Staying “racially” separate? Or becoming black? From a leftist or liberal point of view, one could also argue that assimilating to whiteness means giving up separateness, tribalism, or the attachment to a particular ethnicity.

In fact, without realizing it, when Brodtkin talks about, for example, the early feminist movement, she slips into this different definition of Jewish whiteness. This seems to be the whiteness of the left, the “good whiteness.” “[...] despite the fact that a disproportionate part of the white communists, in the 1930 s and New Left members of the 1960 s were Jews, they identified politically as white, while downplaying their Jewishness” (Brodtkin, p. 167). When “whiteness” is gained through universality, by the promotion of left-wing politics, it means something non-ethnic, non-tribal, non-particularist. However, this logically entails a rather different concept of assimilation: namely, that of the democratic and secular state (the racial bias of which does not appear in this context); in other words, the liberal and color-blind concept of the nation-state, where whiteness will have the meaning of the universal. This is certainly not meant to be equivalent with the “bad whiteness” of capitalists and presumed anti-black racists dominating the racial state, who not only identify as white, while still preserving their Jewishness, but promote their whiteness, and by the same token whiteness as such, as universal and neutral, contrasted to black Americans. The ultimate argument against this type of whiteness reads as follows: the inventors of Barbie and Ken dolls (“those non-biodegradable plastic icons of Anglo-Saxon whiteness, invented by Jewish entrepreneurs”) were of Jewish origin: “those, who produced them were [...] inventing ways of being simultaneously Jewish (though not too Jewish) and white”. In contrast, there is the “other” whiteness mentioned again: “Just as Jewish novelists spoke for a white America that was not ethnic, so did Jewish artists, social critics, feminists, and leftists” (Brodtkin 1999, 171).

Critical Whiteness Studies, so it seems, is quite political from the outset, but likewise in the outcome. The primary intention of relativizing whiteness, which could have been done with the help of historicization, by recourse to social history, is countered by the reassertion of the color-line coming from a theoretically overdetermined critical intention. This critical intention, if it does not entirely annul social history, nevertheless renders its status somewhat dubious and arbitrary, at the very least. One can sense an essential tension between historicization and the reification of the color line. That is why Critical Whiteness Studies are confronted by a severe methodological problem, which can also be traced back to political roots:

There is a persistent dualism evident in the work of the best whiteness studies authors. At times, race – and more specifically, whiteness – is treated as an artificial construct with no real meaning aside from its particular social setting; at other times it becomes not only real, but omnipresent and unchanging, deserving attention as an

independent force. Race appears as both real and unreal, transitory and permanent, ubiquitous and invisible, everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing (Kolchin 2002, p. 160).

It should be added, and emphasized, that this contradictory analysis stems directly from the politics of Whiteness Studies; and that its contradictory nature becomes even more evident whenever Jews are included as an object of study. The case of the Jews among the whites sheds light on methodological problems in Critical Whiteness Studies, not least on the concept of “whiteness” as such. And, more importantly, it reveals a political problem, namely, the disturbing presence of Jews in the arena of ethnic minorities as well as the presence of antisemitism in its manifold manifestations.

To sum up, “whiteness” is a political concept, in a double sense. It is political because it seeks to describe and interpret situations of discrimination and racial subordination: the analysis is explicitly value-laden, even activist, but this perspective in itself need not vitiate the results; on the contrary, should we think about Foucauldian genealogy, for example, it could yield very interesting and politically relevant insights. But whiteness is also a political concept in another sense, since it is subordinated to the intention of criticism. The result is a myopic and narrow view of domination which obscures social history. “In viewing whiteness as an independent category, many whiteness studies authors come too close to reifying it and thereby losing sight of its constructed nature; in assigning whiteness such encompassing power, they tend to ignore other forms of oppression and inequality” (Kolchin 2002, p. 170).

The case of American Jews could have contributed to a large degree to the deconstruction of “whiteness,” precisely because this is a population different from other ethnic whites in so many respects. However, the theoretical drive of Critical Whiteness Studies’ political criticism overruled their primary intention. Coming to terms with the presence of antisemitism would have made this kind of theoretical overdetermination difficult to maintain. This is the reason why Jews constituted an obstacle to that criticism. This obstacle is clearly expressed by Jacobson, when he says that some people, and among them Jewish authors, tend to “disavow any participation in twentieth-century white privilege on the spurious basis of their ‘parents’ and ‘grandparents’ racial oppression” (Jacobson, 1999, p. 7). It is contrary to this tendency that Michael Omi and Howard Winant asserted the following: “the institutionalization of a racial order [...] drew a color line around rather than within Europe” (Omi and Winant, 1987, p. 65). Does it mean that Jews of European origin would be safe from antisemitism? Perhaps it would (although not quite sure), if antisemitism were the prerogative of “white people.” However, Jacobson still insists on “white privilege,” saying that Omi and Winant’s expression is “a useful corrective to those who would disavow their whiteness even while they live lives predicated upon its privileges” (Jacobson, 1999, p. 7).

Israel and “Jewish whiteness”

Even though the European context of Jewish history is completely ignored in the aforementioned accounts, there is a kind of complement to the narrative about American Jewry, namely, the status of Israel, often thought of as a “white colony” in the Middle-East. Not all Whiteness Studies scholars deal with Jews, and even those who do only seldom extend their scope to Israel. However, they quite often voice their harsh criticism of the Jewish state even outside of their field of academic research. Brodtkin herself is an enthusiastic supporter of BDS (she speaks about it in a radio interview made in 2017),³ and while Noel Ignatiev in his books does not deal with Jews, on his website, the “Race traitor,”⁴ he publishes virulent attacks filled with the most stereotypical images of Israel and gives a forum to antisemites such as Israel Shamir. Interestingly enough, on the Race traitor website, the most conspicuously highlighted articles are those which deal with Zionism, or the “Jewish caste in Palestine”.

³ <https://soundcloud.com/treyfpodcast/25-white-jews-whiteness>

⁴ <http://racetraitor.org/>

That the tag “whiteness” is susceptible to be turned against Jews, not merely as a “critical” concept, but rather in an explicitly accusatory manner, is evident if one takes a look at how whiteness and racism scholars analyze the state of Israel. For example, the eminent racism scholar David Theo Goldberg presents Zionism as a European white movement, intending to colonize and civilize the aboriginals in the Middle East. But he also offers a different, and maybe broader and more metaphorical, definition of Jewish whiteness: “Israelis occupy the structural position of whiteness in the Middle-East” (Goldberg 2009, p. 117).

Jacobson, on the contrary, does not take Zionism as “white,” because for him, whiteness is in contrast with Jewish identity, especially until the end of the Second World War. Though, he still tags Israel as white by detecting a historical transformation due to geopolitical reasons and the change in the status of American Jewry: “[...] if racialism had historically been an important component of Zionism, the establishment of a Jewish state ultimately had the opposite effect of whitening the Jews in cultural representations of all sorts: America’s client state in the Middle East became, of ideological necessity and by the imperatives of American nationalism, a white client state” (Jacobson, p. 188).

On the contrary, for Abigail Bakan, working in a Marxist and postcolonial vein, it was Zionism that whitened European Jews, whereas American Jews were whitened during their American history, what she learned from Whiteness Studies. The two processes, she asserts, intersected and thus created Israel.

I argue that a transnational historical turning point occurred after World War II, marking the failure of earlier promises of Jewish emancipation and the simultaneous ascendance of Zionism to a position of hegemony, coinciding with changes in the class and racial configuration of ‘Jewishness’. The close association of Zionism with Jewish whiteness in the United States ascribed these claims specifically with Ashkenazi (European) Jewish populations and intersected with the idea of Israel as an abstract ‘Jewish’ space (Bakan, 2014, p. 254).

Bakan, detects “the role of Zionism in the transition of Jewishness from non-white to a specific form of whiteness”, what she terms as “whiteness by permission” (Bakan 2014, p. 252). Similar quotes from scholarly works could be added ad infinitum. But it is important to see that there is an extreme variability in the characterization of “Jewish whiteness,” “Jewish hegemony and supremacy,” “Zionist racism and colonialism,” and so on. Most of the time, these interpretations are contradicting one another. Still, there is a unanimous intention of radical criticism, and total political agreement on the evaluation of Zionism, Israel, and Jews in the Middle East. A furtive look into these texts would be sufficient to conclude that whenever it comes to Israel, political criticism fully subordinates any interpretation. It is also evident that the concept of “Jewish whiteness” serves that kind of criticism, by which one can comfortably detect that Jews have not only become part of the dominant majority, but also the ruling white elite or “caste” exercising their domination on racist grounds, thereby forming one of the most oppressive majorities in the world. To be sure, in these works, the arbitrary usage of the concept of “whiteness” becomes even more conspicuous than in Whiteness Studies proper, as it encompasses an increasingly diverse set of phenomena. However, this fact does not bother totalizing critics emboldened by their academic prestige.

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