Response to Eric Arnesen

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Abstract

Eric Arnesen's essay highlights some real weaknesses in the burgeoning literature of whiteness and raises serious questions about the use of whiteness as a category of historical analysis. It effectively highlights the ambiguity of the concept and the way it tends to homogenize individuals who differ among themselves on numerous issues, including the definition of race. Moreover, the notion that European immigrants had to "become" white ignores a longstanding legal structure, dating back to the time of the Constitution, that incorporated these immigrants within the category of white American. Nonetheless, Arnesen fails to take account of some of the positive contributions of this literature, or to locate its popularity in the political and racial context of the late twentieth century. Rather than being abandoned, the concept of whiteness must be refined and historicized.

Among the first pieces of legislation enacted by Congress after the ratification of the Constitution was the Naturalization Act of 1790, which established rules by which immigrants from abroad could become American citizens. With no debate, Congress restricted the naturalization process to "free white persons." Thus, a nation that proclaimed itself the asylum of liberty for all mankind excluded a considerable majority of the world's population from American nationality. Thirteen years later, Ohio entered the Union with a constitution limiting the suffrage to "white" males. With the single exception of Maine, every state created between then and the outbreak of the Civil War contained the same provision. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century and in some cases well into the twentieth, numerous states prohibited marriage between white and nonwhite persons.

These illustrations of our long history of legal proscription based on race came to mind while reading Eric Arnesen's provocative and generally persuasive essay. I have long been uneasy at the proliferation of "whiteness" literature, for many of the same reasons Arnesen identifies: the ambiguity of the term itself; its emergence as an all-purpose explanation for political, social, and cultural developments in our history; and the way it obscures other lines of division and sources of identity in American society. I applaud Arnesen for taking on a concept and a body of work that has become so faddish as to deter critical analysis. I hope that his essay marks the beginning of a long-needed debate over the strengths and weaknesses of whiteness as a category of historical analysis.

The provisions mentioned above reinforce two of Arnesen's central points. First, in terms of legal and political rights, European immigrants never had to "become" white. The men who wrote these laws and constitutions subsumed

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these immigrants from the outset within the category of whiteness. No Irish migrants were barred from naturalization as nonwhite. All European immigrants were allowed to vote in states that restricted the suffrage to whites (or, if they were disenfranchised, it was because of failure to meet property or literacy tests, not racial ones). Miscegenation laws were never enforced so as to prevent marriages between Irish Americans and persons of English background, or between Scandinavian and Jewish Americans. Immigrant groups, it goes without saying, suffered discrimination in numerous ways. They were sometimes described as members of distinct "races." But as Arnesen observes, being viewed as different or even inferior and is not necessarily equivalent to being excluded from the category of white American.

Like all products of human activity, race, racism, and "whiteness" themselves have histories. Too often, as Arnesen notes, whiteness has been invoked as a synonym for an all-pervasive, never-changing system of racial supremacy. There is no question that being white has carried with it privileges and entitlements not shared by racial minorities. Whiteness is, in this sense, a valuable possession. But whiteness is never the only characteristic that shapes individual identity. As a category of analysis, whiteness runs the risk of homogenizing a vast population that differs within itself in terms of class, religion, gender, politics, and in many other ways. Its popularity represents what might be called the "California-ization" of historical thinking regarding race. In that state, where so many fanciful American ideas have originated, Italian Americans, Polish Americans, and persons of many other backgrounds are all transformed, at least in terms of discourse, into Anglos. Whiteness literature performs the same alchemy on the nation as a whole. Not being part of a racial minority becomes the most salient element of individual and group identity. Differences within the white or Anglo group, including differences concerning the definition and implications of race itself, are lost in this formulation.

Arnesen is quite correct in noting that W. E. B. Du Bois's offhand remark about the psychological benefits of being white has been elevated into an historical shibboleth. The "wages of whiteness" may well help to explain why white labor during Reconstruction failed to make common cause with the emancipated slaves. In fact, however, Du Bois's main explanation was white working-class adherence to the "American Assumption" of social mobility—a lack of class consciousness, in other words, not an investment in racism. Can whiteness, moreover, explain how and why large majorities of Northern white voters came to support civil rights and the suffrage for African Americans during Reconstruction? Whiteness is one form of consciousness among many. The historian's task is to examine the specific historical circumstances under which one or another element of identity comes to the fore as a motivation for political and social action. Men and women who take for granted their identity as "white" have certainly clung to their privileges in our history. They have also, in various times and places, walked picket lines with nonwhites, voted to accord them the rights of citizens, and united with them against common foes.

There is something about the discussion of whiteness that seems to lead his-

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torians down the road to ambiguous definitions, repetition, and polemics. Arnesen, I fear, has not fully avoided these traps in his own critique. His own essay is repetitious and excessively argumentative. While rightly exposing the inconsistencies and weaknesses of shoddy work, it is needlessly dismissive of better examples of the use of whiteness in historical analysis. I often tell my graduate seminars (which, as we have all experienced, frequently devolve into demolition exercises directed against historians past and present) that the key question to ask about a book is not what is wrong with it, but what we can learn. I fear that Arnesen has failed to apply this maxim in his discussion of the literature of whiteness.

For all its weaknesses and exaggerations, this body of writing has had some salutary effects on our understanding of the American past. It has thrown into question romantic accounts of cross-racial working-class alliances too uncritically featured in labor history produced by both Old and New Left scholars. It has made crystal clear that concepts of race are socially constructed—an insight Arnesen dismisses as old hat but which in my experience strikes students as something quite new. Most importantly, it has deconstructed, as it were, the unstated assumption that "white" is Americans' normal condition and that "race" is something that applies only to nonwhite minorities. We still speak of policemen and black policemen, writers and Hispanic writers. It is widely assumed that when a nonwhite academic receives a fellowship or award, his or her race had something to do with it, while white recipients have been judged in a raceless void. While I believe it inaccurate, moreover, to say that the Irish, Jews, and others had to "become" white, writers in the whiteness genre have made the salutary point that racial identities are not necessarily fixed, and that some groups (Hispanics in the Southwest offer a better example) have at various times been defined as white and as nonwhite depending on population ratios, political power relationships, and economic status. Rather than abandoning the category of "whiteness" altogether, as Arnesen seems to be suggesting, a better approach would be to refine and historicize it. "White" does mean something to those calling for the rights of "white labor" or a "white man's standard of living." The task of the historian is to examine, more carefully than in the past, precisely what it means.

All history, as the saying goes, is contemporary history. Margaret Thatcher's success in generating nationalist enthusiasm during the Falklands War inspired historians to rethink their assumptions about the roots and persistence of working-class patriotism in Britain. Similarly, the emergence of historians' concern with whiteness cannot be separated from perceived white working-class conservatism from George Wallace voters of the 1960s to Ronald Reagan Democrats, or from the persistence of racial inequality despite the dismantling of the legal structure of discrimination. The years since the civil rights revolution have demonstrated that politicians can strike political gold by appealing overtly or subtly to white Americans' fear that their entitlements are being undermined by efforts to uplift others. They have also demonstrated how deeply rooted racism is in our society. Despite the many limitations of this literature, so

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amply demonstrated in Arnesen's essay, writings on whiteness do attempt to explain something real, and to suggest an alternative. To be sure, "the abolition of whiteness" is a psychological slogan, not a political agenda. Nonetheless, the history and meaning of white racial identity are likely to preoccupy historians as long as being white remains a source of privilege in our society.

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