

Reviews

Erika K. Jackson, *Scandinavians in Chicago: The Origins of White Privilege in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019. 229 pages. ISBN: 978-0-252-08382-2.

In January 2018, President Donald Trump infamously talked of “shithole countries” when referring to Latin America and Africa. Instead of immigrants from these parts of the world, the President remarked, the U.S. “should have more people from Norway.” Why involve the Norwegians in a racist tirade this way?

Erika K. Jackson’s fascinating new study, *Scandinavians in Chicago: The Origins of White Privilege in Modern America*, sheds light on this conundrum. Drawing on Scandinavian-American and mainstream U.S. newspapers, periodicals, travel writing, and a variety of other sources, the book presents a historical exploration of Scandinavians’ privileged position in U.S. racial hierarchies from the mid-1800s to the 1920s. Jackson draws on the critical study of whiteness that burgeoned in the 1990s, but her study seeks to overcome some limitations in this scholarship. Whereas most previous scholars have concentrated on “groups who fought for legitimacy [as whites],” Jackson notes that it is also “essential to investigate the process by which those who achieved racial hegemony were able to do so” (4). Consequently, she puts the focus on Scandinavians, whose whiteness was not only beyond scrutiny but even hegemonic. Recently, such scholars as Dag Blanck, Jørg Brøndal, and Gunlög Fur have started to explore Scandinavian Americans’ relationship to race, and Jackson continues this vein of interrogation.

Her study focuses on Chicago, a major hub of Scandinavian immigration to North America and one of the world’s most Scandinavian cities around the turn of the twentieth century. It had the world’s second-largest Swedish community after Stockholm, while its Norwegian population was third only to Oslo and Bergen. There were fewer Danes, but even they were not a small group (some 18,000 in 1910). In Chicago, Scandinavians encoun-

tered the urban United States in much of its diversity. Almost four out of five Chicagoans were immigrants or children of immigrants, Scandinavians rubbing shoulders with the Irish, Germans, Poles, and many other European nationalities. The city's South Side had also a major African American population.

Jackson tracks how Scandinavians' status within the city's ethnic hierarchy changed over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While in the 1840s some native-born Chicagoans could still lament the uncivilized savagery of the Scandinavian newcomers, these kinds of remarks became ever rarer as the century progressed. By the 1890s, Scandinavians occupied an advantageous position on Chicago's labor and housing markets, and this social ascendancy was intimately linked to race. As the discourse on European immigration became increasingly racialized, those groups that could claim whiteness fared better than those whose whiteness was less clear. Scandinavians were in a uniquely comfortable position. Not only did most contemporary authorities on race agree that Scandinavians were indeed white; indeed, they were viewed as an exemplarily pure stock of white people, the representatives of the esteemed Nordic race *par excellence*.

Jackson explores how the Scandinavian elite of Chicago learned to make strategic use of this status as exemplary whites. For example, she demonstrates how Scandinavians used the 1893 Chicago's World Fair Exhibition (or World Columbian Exhibition) as an "opportunity to mark their entrance into larger American society through acculturation" (63), using the pavilions of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark to portray an image of Scandinavians as champions of racial progress and white civilization. Jackson also pays careful attention to the gendered dynamics of racial construction, particularly in a fascinating chapter on the image of "the Swedish maid." She examines how Scandinavian women emerged as the epitome of female virtue and competence in the contested market of domestic service in urban America, with the Scandinavian-American press consciously playing up these racial and gendered angles. Indeed, Scandinavians not only conformed to already-existing U.S. notions of race, but sought to actively influence mainstream racial perceptions.

Jackson's study is a welcome challenge to the insularity of much of the traditional immigration historiography. The classic story of immigrant integration has been that of hard-working men and women pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, receiving little help from the surrounding society. This insular focus on ethnic communities and their strongmen has hidden from view the broader societal structures – such as race – that have conditioned immigrants' access to important resources such as citizenship, em-

ployment, housing and education. Jackson makes these contexts visible, adding to the growing body of literature on immigrants' engagement with other ethnic groups and the broader U.S. society.

Yet, Jackson's societal focus comes with some blind spots of its own. She doesn't in her analysis sufficiently acknowledge the internal debates within whiteness historiography that she refers to in the introduction (7–8), and her image of the U.S. society and its racial discourse can at times be rather homogeneous (it appears that "American" is often used implicitly as a shorthand for "white American"). However, perhaps the most significant shortcoming is the book's lack of transnational sensibility. Jackson discusses well the contexts of Chicago and the U.S., but has relatively little to say about the immigrants' connections to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. One wonders how nationalist mobilizations in these countries affected the immigrants' thinking on race and nationality. It would be interesting to explore, for example, how Norwegian-Americans' newfound interest in the Norwegian language in the 1920s Chicago – a development that Jackson briefly mentions (149) – was connected to the politicization of language in contemporary Norway. Jackson also leaves unaddressed the Nordic countries' own histories of colonialism and racism, and these histories' implications for Scandinavian ideas on African Americans or eastern Europeans. Engagement with the burgeoning Nordic postcolonial research, and transnational immigration historiography, would have benefited Jackson's analysis.

Despite this methodologically nationalist bent, Jackson's study is a well-crafted and fascinating look at the Scandinavians' relationship with race in the U.S. It breaks new scholarly ground but has also clear contemporary relevance, as racial nationalism and white supremacy have been making a troubling comeback in the U.S. political mainstream. To understand the intellectual and social historical context of President Trump's preference for Nordic immigrants, Jackson's book is a good place to start.

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Philathia Bolton, Cassander L. Smith, and Lee Bebout, eds., *Teaching with Tension: Race, Resistance, and Reality in the Classroom*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2019. 304 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8101-3911-4.