

Karen Brodtkin (1998) “How Jews Became White Folks?”**Main Point:**

Discusses how Jews’ master status has changed from being a minority to being what people consider “white.” [“Real Americans are white and the real whites came from northwest Europe” (Brodtkin, 30)]. Jews, along with southern and eastern European immigrants, African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans, were thought of as subordinate to “real” white Americans. Brodtkin discusses how racism and discrimination has evolved in America and how different ethnic groups have been affected. She makes a point to explain Jews’ successful assimilation into culture and “upward mobility” as a result of government aid, which explains why African Americans have yet to reach that level. Brodtkin focuses on four main topics to answer her thesis: Euroraces, whitening Euro-ethnics, education and occupation, and suburbanization.

Central Issues and Concepts:*Euroraces*

During the nineteenth century over 23 million European immigrants migrated to America, composing the majority of major cities’ population. However, the Red Scare of 1919 “link anti-immigrant with anti-working-class sentiment” because many strikers in the New England area were immigrants (Brodtkin, 27). Government made efforts to end immigration and the development of eugenics-“breeding for a “better” humanity” and scientific racism (Brodtkin, 28). These theories gave way to thoughts that race and class are interrelated and that there was scientific proof. The government used intelligence tests to ensure that minorities would not advance in society. These practices could be found in the military, colleges, and universities. Jews were the first immigrants to matriculate in large numbers to college. However, colleges like Columbia implemented admission policies that required intelligence tests, a photo, father’s name and other information that would notify the University of your Race. (Such policies are still seen today in college application processes.)

Whitening Euro-ethnics

Brodtkin explains that money and “being incorporated into an expanded version of whiteness [helped] open up the economic doors to middle-class status” for Jews (Brodtkin, 36). The war against “fascism” was a factor in Jews “becoming white.” An example would be the 1940 census that no longer distinguished native whites of immigrant status from native born. Anti-Semitism was less apparent after World War II as the heights that Jews could reach became high. “Economic prosperity” has played a key role in the assimilation process of Jews. This prosperity was the result of the GI Bill of 1944 that Brodtkin calls the “most massive affirmative action program in American history, because it was intended for specific group of people (whites) and was not used to aid others” (38). The bill brought more educational opportunities and cheaper home mortgages.

Education and Occupation

Education’s importance was seen by the over 8 million GI’s who took advantage of the opportunity to attend college. It was also seen in the transformation of Silicon Valley from an

agricultural region into a technology powerhouse. As white men matriculated in the workforce, they were replaced by minorities. Minorities were not awarded the same opportunities; especially African Americans who Brodtkin says had ambitions to do better, but lacked the resources. In fact, whites did not want them near, as seen in the increase of riots and lynching post World War II.

Suburbanization

After World War II, the number of homeowners doubled as a result of suburbia. The Federal Housing Administration made sure that suburbs were open to more than GI's returning from war, which allowed Jews to live in nicer homes. However, the suburbs were cut off from Blacks. All the while, urbanization destroyed neighborhoods to build highways. Minorities, especially African Americans, who wanted to move to the suburbs, were unable to, due to public policy that promoted racial segregation. African Americans were unable to sale their homes, because of secret "neighborhood ranking systems" that devalued their homes.

Two Key Quotes:

"How we interpret Jewish social mobility in this milieu depends on whom we compare them to. Compared with other immigrants, Jews were upwardly mobile. But compared with nonimmigrant white, that mobility was very limited and circumscribed" (Brodtkin, 33).

"Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euro-ethnics to become middle class, economic prosperity also played a very powerful role in the whitening process" (Brodtkin, 37).

Questions:

- Brodtkin's book title is about Jews becoming "white;" however, she spends little time on Jews. What is her purpose for examining African American's struggles when the reader knows that they have not or will not assimilate?
- Was Jews' assimilation after World War II a result of sympathy for what happened during the Holocaust?