CHAPTER

3

How White People Became White

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By the eastern European immigration the labor force has been cleft horizontally into two great divisions. The upper stratum includes what is known in mill parlance as the English-speaking men; the lower contains the "Hunkies" or "Ginnies." Or, if you prefer, the former are the "white men," the latter the "foreigners."

John Fitch, *The Steel Workers*

In 1980, Joseph Loguidice, an elderly Italian-American from Chicago, sat down to give his life story to an interviewer. His first and most vivid childhood recollection was of a race riot that had occurred on the city's near north side. Wagons full of policemen with "peculiar hats" streamed into his neighborhood. But the "one thing that stood out in my mind," Loguidice remembered after six decades, was "a man running down the middle of the street hollering . . . 'I'm White, I'm White!'" After first taking him for an African-American, Loguidice soon realized that the man was a white coal handler covered in dust. He was screaming for his life, fearing that "people would shoot him down." He had, Loguidice concluded, "got caught up in . . . this racial thing."[1]

Joseph Loguidice's tale might be taken as a metaphor for the situation of millions of "new immigrants" from Eastern and Southern Europe who arrived in the United States between the end of the nineteenth century and

the early 1920s. That this episode made such a profound impression is in itself significant, suggesting both that this was a strange, new situation and that thinking about race became an important part of the consciousness of immigrants like Loguidice. How did this racial awareness and increasingly racialized worldview develop among new immigrant workers? Most did not arrive with conventional U.S. attitudes regarding "racial" difference, let alone its significance and implications in industrial America. Yet most, it seems, "got caught up in . . . this racial thing." How did this happen? If race was indeed socially constructed, then what was the raw material that went into the process?

How did these immigrant workers come to be viewed in racial terms by others—employers, the state, reformers, and other workers? Like the coal handler in Loguidice's story, their own ascribed racial identity was not always clear. A whole range of evidence—laws, court cases, formal racial ideology, social conventions, and popular culture in the form of slang, songs, films, cartoons, ethnic jokes, and popular theatre—suggests that the native born and older immigrants often placed the new immigrants not only *above* African- and Asian-Americans, for example, but also *below* "white" people. Indeed, many of the older immigrants, and particularly the Irish, had themselves been perceived as "nonwhite" just a generation earlier. As labor historians, we are interested in the ways in which Polish, Italian, and other European artisans and peasants became American workers, but we are equally concerned with the process by which they became "white." Indeed, in the U.S. the two identities merged, and this explains a great deal of the persistent divisions within the working-class population. How did immigrant workers wind up inbetween"? . . .

We make no brief for the consistency with which "race" was used, by experts or popularly, to describe the "new immigrant" Southern and East Europeans who dominated the ranks of those coming to the U.S. between 1895 and 1924 and who "remade" the American working class in that period. We regard such inconsistency as important evidence of the "inbetween"[2] racial status of such immigrants. The story of Americanization is vital and compelling, but it took place in a nation also obsessed by race. For new immigrant workers the processes of "becoming white" and "becoming American" were connected at every turn. The "American standard of living," which labor organizers alternately and simultaneously accused new immigrants of undermining and encouraged them to defend via class organization, rested on white men's wages." Political debate turned on whether new immigrants were fit to join the American nation and "American race." Nor do we argue that new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were in the same situation as non-whites. Stark differences between the racialized status of African-Americans and the racial inbetween-ness of new immigrants meant that the latter *eventually* "became ethnic" and that their trajectory was predictable. But their history was sloppier than their trajectory. From day to day they were, to borrow from E. P. Thompson, "proto-nothing," reacting and acting in a highly racialized nation.[3]

America's racial vocabulary had no agency of its own, but rather reflected material conditions and power relations—the situations that workers faced on a daily basis in their workplaces and communities. Yet the words themselves were important. They were not only the means by which native born and elite people marked new immigrants as inferiors, but also those by which immigrant workers came to locate themselves and those about them in the nation's racial hierarchy. In beginning to analyze the vocabulary of race, it makes little sense for historians to invest the words themselves with an agency that could be exercised only by real historical actors, or meanings that derived only from the particular historical contexts in which the language was developed and employed.

The word *guinea,* for example, had long referred to African slaves, particularly those from the continent's northwest coast, and to their descendants. But from the late 1890s, the term was increasingly applied to southern European migrants, first and especially to Sicilians and southern Italians, who often came as contract laborers. At various times and places in the United States, *guinea* has been applied to mark Greeks, Jews, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, and perhaps any new immigrant.[4]

Likewise, *hunky,* which began life, probably in the early twentieth century, as a corruption of "Hungarian," eventually became a pan-Slavic slur connected with perceived immigrant racial characteristics. By World War I the term was frequently used to describe any immigrant steelworker, as in *mill hunky.* Opponents of the Great 1919 Steel Strike, including some native born skilled workers, derided the struggle as a "hunky strike." Yet Josef Barton's work suggests that for Poles, Croats, Slovenians, and other immigrants who often worked together in difficult, dangerous situations, the term embraced a remarkable, if fragile, sense of prideful identity across ethnic lines. In *Out of This Furnace,* his epic novel of 1941 based on the lives of Slavic steelworkers, Thomas Bell observed that the word *hunky* bespoke "unconcealed racial prejudice" and a "denial of social and racial equality." Yet as these workers built the industrial unions of the late 1930s and took greater control over their own lives, the meaning of the term began to change. The pride with which second- and third-generation Slavic-American steelworkers, women as well as men, wore the label in the early 1970s seemed to have far more to do with class than with ethnic identity. At about the same time, the word *honky,* possibly a corruption of *hunky,* came into common use as black nationalism reemerged as a major ideological force in the African-American community.[5]

Words and phrases employed by social scientists to capture the inbetween identity of the new immigrants are a bit more descriptive, if more cumbersome. As late as 1937, John Dollard wrote repeatedly of the immigrant working class as "our temporary Negroes." More precise, if less dramatic, is the designation "not-yet-white ethnics" offered by immigration historian John Bukowczyk. The term not only reflects the popular perceptions and everyday experiences of such workers, but also conveys the dynamic quality of racial formation.[6]

The examples of Greeks and Italians particularly underscore the new immigrants' ambiguous positions with regard to popular perceptions of race. When Greeks suffered as victims of an Omaha race riot in 1909 and when seven Italians died at the hands of lynchers in Louisiana in 1891, their less-than-white racial status mattered alongside their nationalities. Indeed, as Loguidice's coal handler shows, their ambivalent racial status put their lives in jeopardy. According to Gunther Peck's fine study of copper miners in Bingham, Utah, the Greek and Italian immigrants were "nonwhite" before their tension-fraught cooperation with the Western Federation of Miners during a 1912 strike ensured that "the category of Caucasian worker changed and expanded." Indeed, the work of Dan Georgakas and Yvette Huginnie shows that Greeks and other Southern Europeans often "bivouacked" with other "non-white" workers in Western mining towns. Pocatello, Idaho, Jim-Crowed Greeks in the early twentieth century and in Arizona they were not welcomed by white workers in "white men's towns" or "white men's jobs." In Chicago during the Great Depression, a German-American wife expressed regret over marrying her "half-nigger," Greek-American husband. African-American slang in the 1920s in South Carolina counted those of mixed American Indian, African-American, and white heritage as *Greeks*. Greek-Americans in the Midwest showed great anxieties about race, and were perceived not only as Puerto Rican, mulatto, Mexican, or Arab, but also as non-white *because of* being Greek.[7]

Italians, involved in a spectacular international diaspora in the early twentieth century, were racialized as the "Chinese of Europe" in many lands.[8] But in the U.S. their racialization was pronounced and, as *guinea's* evolution suggests, more likely to connect Italians with Africans. During the debate at the Louisiana state constitutional convention of 1898 over how to disfranchise blacks, and over which whites might lose the vote, some acknowledged that the Italian's skin "happens to be white" even as they argued for his disfranchisement. But others held that "according to the spirit of our meaning when we speak of 'white man's government,' [the Italians] are as black as the blackest negro in existence."[9] More than metaphor intruded on this judgment. At the turn of the century, a West Coast construction boss was asked, "You don't call the Italian a white man?" The negative reply assured the questioner that the Italian was "a dago." Recent studies of Italian- and Greek-Americans make a strong case that racial, not just ethnic, oppression long plagued "non-white" immigrants from Southern Europe.[10]

The racialization of East Europeans was likewise striking. While racist jokes mocked the black servant who thought her child, fathered by a Chinese man, would be a Jew, racist folklore held that Jews, inside-out, were "niggers." In 1926 Serbo-Croatians ranked near the bottom of a list of forty "ethnic" groups from "white American" respondents were asked to order according to the respondents' willingness to associate with members of each group. They placed just above Negroes, Filipinos, and Japanese. Just above them were Poles, who were near the middle of the list. One sociologist has recently written that "a good many groups on this color continuum [were] not considered white by a large number of Americans."[11] The literal inbetween-ness of new immigrants on such a list suggests what popular speech affirms: The state of whiteness was approached gradually and controversially. The authority of the state itself both smoothed and complicated that approach.

Notes

1. The epigraph is from John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* (New York, 1910), 147. Joe Sauris, Interview with Joseph Loguidice, July 25, 1980, Italians in Chicago Project, copy of transcript, Box 6, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.

2. We borrow "inbetween" from Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned 'Other' in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990," *American Quarterly,* 44 (September 1992): passim, and also from John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New York, 1974), 169.

3. Lawrence Glickman, "Inventing the 'American Standard of Living': Gender, Race and Working-Class Identity, 1880–1925," *Labor History,* 34 (Spring–Summer, 1993): 221–35; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (Urbana, Ill., 1981), 254.

4. On *guinea*'s history, see David Roediger, "Guineas, Wiggers and the Dramas of Racialized Culture," *American Literary History,* 7 (1995): 654. On post-1890 usages, see William Harlen Gilbert, Jr., "Memorandum Concerning the Characteristics of the Larger Mixed-Blood Islands of the United States," *Social Forces,* 24 (March 1946): 442; *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2d ed. (Oxford, 1989), 6:937–38; Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall, eds., *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cambridge and London, 1991), 2: 838.

5. Tamony's notes on *hunky* (or *hunkie*) speculate on links to *honky* (or *honkie*) and refer to the former as an "old labour term." By no means did *Hun* refer unambiguously to Germans before World War I. See, e.g., Henry White, "Immigration Restriction as a Necessity," *American Federationist,* 4 (June 1897): 67; Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880–1892: Politics, Culture and Steel* (Pittsburgh, 1992), 216–17; David Brody, *Steelworkers in America* (New York, 1969), 120–21. See also the *Mill Hunky Herald,* published in Pittsburgh throughout the late 1970s.

6. Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town,* 2d ed. (Garden City, N.Y., 1949), 93; Barry Goldberg, "Historical Reflections on Transnationalism, Race, and the American Immigrant Saga" (unpublished paper delivered at the Rethinking Migration, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in Historical Perspective Conferences, New York Academy of the Sciences, May, 1990).

7. Albert S. Broussard, "George Albert Flippin and Race Relations in a Western Rural Community," *The Midwest Review,* 12 (1990): 15, n. 42; J. Alexander Karlin, "The Italo-American Incident of 1891 and the Road to Reunion," *Journal of Southern History,* 8 (1942); Gunther Peck, "Padrones and Protest: 'Old' Radicals and 'New' Immigrants in Bingham, Utah, 1905–1912," *Western Historical Quarterly,* (May 1993): 177; Dan Georgakas, *Greek America at Work* (New York, 1992), 12 and 16–17; Yvette Huginnie, *Strikitos: Race, Class, and Work in the Arizona Copper Industry, 1870–1920,* Thesis (Ph.D.) Yale University, 1991.