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History 548 – Dr. Yeh

Midterm Essay

02 March 2009

### How the Irish Exploited the Racial Divide

When examining different ethnic groups in American history, hierarchical relationships are evident in almost every situation. Not only are whites and blacks separated as shown by the institution of slavery, even peoples that we would today call white were placed in subordinate positions to other whites. In Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, we are shown a glimpse of how one ethnic group fought to escape the social hierarchy that placed them below others by taking on the role of white oppressors. While Ignatiev's research effectively illustrates the divide between Irish immigrants and Anglo-Saxon nativists, he does not successfully demonstrate how race, or the color of a person's skin, demonstrated this divide. Instead, factors that include class and religion are clearly prominent, as pre-existing British anti-Catholicism and anti-Irish sentiments remained. As such, the Irish did not need to become white to overcome social hierarchy, but did utilize the already existing racial hierarchy to move up the economic ladder and receive greater acceptance from reigning white nativists. An examination of two examples in Ignatiev's argument will illustrate how the Irish were already white, but used the racial divide to better their own status in America using class division and violence.

One way in which Ignatiev explains how the Irish became white is in their separating the labor force between Irish and African-Americans. As Irish immigrants first sought jobs in America, they found themselves working in occupations similarly allowed to blacks. This does not prove that the Irish were recognized as black. It simply proves that the Irish were seen as an

“other”, not racially other, but perhaps religiously or ethnically other. On the social ladder, new immigrants were planted at the bottom, and the fact that blacks were also in this position does not allow for speculation that Irish and blacks were seen as racially similar. In fact, in some instances, Irish immigrants were hired in occupations that were considered too dangerous to risk losing African-American capital. Occupying the lowest positions in the labor force, Irish workers found a way to move up the social hierarchy by taking advantage of the racial hierarchy in America. According to Ignatiev, “to be acknowledged as white, it was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found.”<sup>1</sup> It is significant that the Irish exploited the racial divide that already existed in America to climb up the social ladder by excluding African-Americans from certain jobs, but adding whiteness and blackness to particular occupations is pure speculation.

It was by separating themselves in the labor force from African-Americans that allowed the Irish to gain greater social acceptance. Toward the end of his book, Ignatiev discusses the post-Civil War Era and the overthrow of Reconstruction efforts to erase racial hierarchy. He draws upon W.E.B. Du Bois, who argued, “When white laborers were convinced that the degradation of Negro labor was more fundamental than the uplift of white labor, the end was in sight.”<sup>2</sup> It was not the end of Irish blackness that was seen, but the end of black social progression. The Irish had successfully raised their social standing, not by becoming equal to Anglo-Saxon nativists, but by placing themselves in an economic class above the African race. Had the Irish not been perceived as having white skin, native-born whites probably would not have allowed them to place themselves above native blacks. As a racial hierarchy already

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 130.

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois, as quoted in Ignatiev, 200.

existed, both in the North and the South, it should come as no surprise that employers were willing to hire Irish laborers at the exclusion of African-Americans.

The separation of Irish and African-American labor was not successful enough to place the Irish on an equal social standing with native-born white Americans. As Ignatiev acknowledges, although white nativists and Irish immigrants combined to make up the “waged labor force of industry,” they remained “from different social backgrounds and by no means [were] perfectly homogenized.”<sup>3</sup> How the Irish achieved an equal status with white nativists is not really proven in the book, and whether or not they ever did attain social equality is left to further speculation. Either way, the Irish continued to exploit the racial divide as they worked their way up the social hierarchy. Unfortunately, the tactics utilized by Irish immigrants were not limited to class manipulation, and peaceful means to separate the Irish from African-Americans also gave way to violence. Even more disheartening is the fact that violence to achieve unity was nothing new to American society. The United States itself was formed out of a war for independence, and its subsequent wars from the naval skirmishes with the French and Barbary pirates to the War with Mexico all fostered some sense of American identity.

The Irish had no need to form an identity within their own cultural heritage, but in order to increase their standing to that of native whites, they turned against a perceived “common enemy.” Originally, the Irish fought on the side of abolitionists seeing slavery as a similar evil to the subjection placed upon them by the British. Eventually, however, racism gave way to violence against blacks. In his chapter on “The Tumultuous Republic,” Ignatiev discusses the many riots that plagued America in the middle of the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, many of these riots were instigated by economic considerations. In the “Flying Horse Riot” of 1834, many Irish joined with other white laborers intent on the “destruction of the property, and injury

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<sup>3</sup> Ignatiev, 134.

to the persons, of the colored people, with intent ... to induce, or compel them to remove from [the] district.”<sup>4</sup> Although newspapers did not look upon such rioters positively, they were far more accepting of violence by whites than blacks. As Ignatiev demonstrates, “any sympathy black people might have enjoyed from respectable elements was quickly dissipated when they took steps to defend themselves.”<sup>5</sup> Violence, when engaged in for purposes to criticize injustice, was only accepted as a white prerogative, and the Irish utilized this to their own advantage. Had they not already been perceived in America as being a part of the white race, the right to self-defense would not have applied to the Irish, just as it was denied to blacks.

Riots were not the only way in which the Irish engaged in violent acts that brought them closer to native-born whites. Just as Americans developed a common identity by fighting in wars, the Irish were similarly allowed to fight alongside nativists on the battlefield. This does not mean that segregation did not exist. Militias were commonly formed on ethnic grounds, and as such, the Irish formed various militia units of their own. Had they been considered less than white, they would have been disallowed this right. Although blacks had participated in America’s Revolutionary War, by the War of 1812, “the policy came to be that Afro-Americans could be used only in nonmilitary capacities.”<sup>6</sup> The Irish, on the other hand, did form their own militias and fought alongside native-born whites. “By 1846 nine Philadelphia companies out of thirty were composed entirely of immigrants, and the outbreak of the Mexican War provided the occasion for still others to come together.”<sup>7</sup> In the Civil War, thousands of Irish fought in ethnically separated regiments and brigades, thus continuing the tradition of linking violence with American identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Emma Jones Lapsansky, quoted in Ignatiev, 148.

<sup>5</sup> Ignatiev, 162.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

There is no doubt that the Irish immigrants met prejudice in their new homes in America. The prejudice they received was in many ways similar to that given to African-Americans, though at times it was even worse. A racial hierarchy also unquestionably existed, placing whites above blacks. The story of Irish ascension, however, does not require a racial explanation. Ignatiev has successfully shown how the Irish utilized the American hierarchy based on race to overcome social prejudice and provide opportunities for their own ethnic group. Irish use of racial hatred to rise above social standings simply points stronger to the racism that existed throughout America, even amongst a people with abolitionist sentiment. What Ignatiev has done is opened the doors for further research with the intent to discover the multi-dimensional hierarchies that existed throughout American history, whether with regard to race, ethnicity, class, or gender, and to study how people within lower social standings utilized other hierarchies to their own advantage.