

The Uses of Whiteness: what sociologists working on Europe can draw from US research on whiteness

Abstract

Whiteness studies are trans-disciplinary, but here the focus is principally on sociology and social history. Firstly, the major ways in which whiteness in this literature has hitherto been problematised are identified, elucidated and synthesised to provide a sociological take on the multidisciplinary work so far. Five interpretations are identified; whiteness as absence, as content, a set of norms, as resources and a contingent hierarchy. Secondly, some proposals are made regarding the whiteness problematic's degree of pertinence to European settings, with a brief discussion of the Irish case. Finally I argue that whiteness is useful if conceptualised in a way that sets it within the parameters of studies of racism.

Keywords; identities, racism, whiteness.

This paper firstly reviews some of the burgeoning US literature on whiteness, identifies significant sociological threads running through it and synthesises them. ⁱ Secondly, I argue that whiteness is a relevant paradigm for European social worlds by highlighting how it can be understood, and what use it is as a distinct sub-field within the study of racist phenomena. Whiteness is most effectively conceptualised as both a resource and a contingent hierarchy, and its utility is that it enables collective identities to be examined in a more nuanced way than is allowed for by the hegemonic black/white, or more accurately, white/non-white paradigms. This approach thus interrogates the assumed monolithic status of 'whites', allowing a more fluid picture of situational micro-level power relations to emerge.

Whiteness: the story so far

Ostensibly, whiteness studies follow a time-honoured pattern: originating in the cultural orbit of black America, then being adopted by radical elements within the dominant culture. The corpus can be traced back through Du Bois (1977[1935]), Hughes, (1947), Wright (1992), Ellison (1952), Baldwin (1955, 1984, 1985a, b and c), and latterly, in the colonial context, to Fanon (1967). Roediger's survey of black perspectives (1999) serves

to emphasise the genealogy of, and vernacular setting for, the trope of whiteness as 'terror' identified both by early writers, and Morrison (1987, 1993) and hooks (1997). Indeed, one could emerge from an initial reading of the material convinced that the whiteness studies paradigm is so specific to America's largely bipolar racialised arena that it is simply an exotic outpost of academia with little to bring to Europeans' knowledge of ourselves and the way we form and sustain collective identities.

There are burgeoning corpuses on the construction of whiteness in the US context (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Frankenberg, 1994, 1997; Hill, 1997; Roediger, 1991; Barrett and Roediger, 1997; Lipsitz, 1995; Fine et al., 1996) but little yet on whiteness qua whiteness in contemporary Europe. Much of the work produced by academics based in Europe either focuses elsewhere (Bonnet, 1999; Back and Ware, 2001), or on a historical relationship (Ware, 1992; McClintock, 1995) without explicit engagement with the contemporary.

The writing that does address contemporary matters does so indirectly via the question of labour migration (Miles, 1982, 1993; Noiriel, 1988). This reinstates pre-World War II white immigration into Europe in a research agenda that had become fixated on black and Asian migratory waves and the hegemonic 'race relations' paradigm of the 60s and 70s. The 'new immigration' into Western Europe has further underscored the idea that Others can also be white, or even members of the same nation (Sniderman et al., 2000). Indeed, my departure point is that identities are multiple and contingent (Anthias, 2003) and that racialisation in the early 21st century is not fixed by a black-white binary any more than it was in the 16th century (Garner, 2003). Culture is as important as skin colour in racialising discourse, i.e. they are equally valid elements of a 'discursive formation' (Foucault, 1969; 1971). Nominally white Europeans can also be racialised in the process of constructing national identities, as has been the case in Britain with nomadic, Jewish and Irish people, as well as Eastern Europeans. Sivanandan (2001) even coins the term 'xeno-racism' (as distinct from racism *stricto sensu*, a property of white-black power relations) for this contemporary form of racialisation. The whiteness problematic therefore appears to be seeping into the fabric of some of the more challenging work on racism in a European context.

In the remainder of this first section, the most striking and sociologically useful themes to recur in this literature will be examined using the following schema.ⁱⁱ Firstly, we will study the opposing arguments that whiteness is a quality of invisibility on one hand, and that it actually has a very distinct content, on the other. Then I will identify three further areas where the ‘content of whiteness’ might be best understood: as a set of norms or values; as resources; and as a contingent hierarchy.

Whiteness as Malevolent Absence

Dyer (1997) concludes that whiteness is an invisible perspective, a dominant and normative space against which difference is measured. This deepens a theme identified by McIntosh (1988), who stresses the capacity that whiteness brings for passing unnoticed, unharrassed, ‘unothered’ through public space. Frankenberg’s (1994) women interviewees express varying degrees of unawareness of their own whiteness until they have epiphanies in specific contexts, while Phoenix (1996) finds similar non-consciousness among young people in London. However, it is a short step from ‘absence’ to negligence, and indeed academic practice that ignores the pervasive and oppressive normativeness of whiteness in many fields has rightly faced sustained critique over the last decade. Morrison (1993) for example, even argues that in American literature, blackness rather than whiteness was rendered invisible, thus linking to Ellison’s trope of malevolent neglect. However compelling this absence is, I am not convinced that ‘absence’ is synonymous with ‘lack of content’. Like Paynter (2001:135), I interpret whiteness as a ‘filled, rather than empty category’. Invisibility seems a more accurate term, in that it denotes ostensible absence but actual presence.

Indeed, the ‘invisibility’ alluded to, following Ellison, is a form of obfuscated content whose privileged perspective reveals itself only in the act of narration. Filmmaker Jean Renoir, commenting about his art, states: ‘You are never so revealing about yourself than when telling someone else’s story’. This is the kind of truth that Goldberg (2000) excavates in his argument on state formations in modernity, an enterprise whose foundations he contends were racialised from the outset. Yet even the uses of the concept of ‘invisibility’ lead to further qualifications. Whiteness may well be invisible to those categorising themselves as ‘white’. McIntosh’s uncommon reflexivity is augmented by Wildman’s (1997) and contextualised by Mahoney (1997), who argues that whiteness becomes visible from the perspective of ‘people of color’. Whites in other words,

experience a number of mundane transactions as unproblematic, not realising that this is the case because of their own whiteness, while others, bearing the burden of suspicion, encounter extra checks and questions.

Another dimension of this line of enquiry is that explored by Jones (1997:74) in his study of how 'race' as a social practice evacuates individuality from those objectified and reduces them to a list of imputed bio-cultural characteristics.ⁱⁱⁱ These, he argues, form the basis of white responses to black subjects at particular moments, when 'race' constitutes a line dividing innocence from guilt.^{iv} We might then argue that one mechanism for white 'invisibility' is the conferral of an otherness made visible only as a form of racialised 'simulacra' (Baudrillard, 1984), i.e. multiple identical images with no original, thus constituting the opposites of whiteness in the form of a 'hyper-reality'. The question of 'invisibility' and 'malevolent absence' seem to be determined primarily by the perspective from which whiteness is experienced: i.e. there is nothing 'invisible' about whiteness for African-Americans.

Whiteness with Content

In fruitful dialogue with the argument on invisibility is one in which not only the maintenance and policing of the 'colour line', but also the content and internal boundaries of whiteness are foregrounded. This furrow has been ploughed principally with empirical tools by historians such as Horsman (1981), Saxton (1990), Roediger (1991), Allen (1994a; 1994b), Ignatiev (1996). Barrett and Roediger (1997) and Jacobson (1998) have filled in details of this putative absence, principally in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The complexity of identity construction emerges from this rich work as the founding social hierarchies of America are examined across time, demonstrating that while the lines separating White Europeans from 'Indians', Blacks, Mexicans and Chinese were in different places, differently relevant and configured, there was a parallel racialising of segments of the 'white' population. Indeed, the case of the Catholic Irish is a microcosm of these processes: banished to an intermediate zone between white Protestantism and blackness in urban America, the Irish realised that whiteness was social identity that would grant relative privilege. This set them on a course for collective Americanisation in which they defined themselves against free blacks in the workplace and residential areas; against black slaves by backing the pro-slavery Democrats; against

indigenous Americans in the Indian Wars and Mexicans in the Mexican wars^v (Garner, 2003).

It was mid-century when notions of Anglo-Saxon supremacy began to gain intellectual support, bolstered by an amalgam of the press, a network of scientists engaged in somatic measurements (Horsman, 1981) and internationally read work by such as Knox and Gobineau. The latter two developed the notion that within the white 'race', Anglo-Saxons were particularly capable of civilisation in comparison to Celts, Slavs and Latins. The work of US labour historians in particular demonstrates that incoming migrant Europeans were exposed to a situation where whiteness exerted simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal forces: pushing Europeans to claim whiteness and gain privileged access to resources, psychological and social capital (Du Bois' 'wages of whiteness'), while playing off national groups against each other in an effort to be whiter than the other.

All of this raises the question, when did whiteness begin? Nineteenth century immigrants did not walk into a social hierarchy and corresponding taxonomy invented specifically for them. The literature on early modernity arrives at a rough consensus: the co-existence of religious labels of identity; Christian and Heathen in the American colonies (Jordan, 1968; Frederickson, 1988; Paynter, 2001) rendered colour distinctions redundant until slaves began to convert.^{vi} Additionally, the status of 'free' and 'unfree' labour did not correspond perfectly to African and European workers until after white indentured labourers became numerically inferior due to their access to land-ownership. Around the last decade of the 17th century, legislation against voting rights for blacks, 'race' mixing and restrictions on property ownership for blacks is enacted. We can thus start the clock of whiteness as an explicit legitimised social identity from that point.^{vii}

Whiteness as a Set of Norms

The idea that whiteness encapsulates a particular set of norms is raised by Jacobson's reading of the debates on US citizenship in 1870 (1998:73-74): capacity for industriousness, Christianity, degree of freedom, exercise of independent thought necessary for democratic government, and colour. Paynter's (2001) list reads; Christianity, hypocrisy, cultural gentility (i.e. cultural chauvinism). Morrison (1987) and hooks (1997) stress the terror and domination of whites as the primary values seen from a black perspective in terms of the power of naming, defining, decision-making and the use of symbolic and actual violence, while Baldwin (1985b:404) refers to the cumulative

effect of ‘the millions of details twenty-four hours of every day which spell out to you that you are a worthless human being’.

How have these identified norms generated whiteness in the North American context as sociologically comprehensible and empirically observable phenomena?

Toni Morrison (1993) sees whiteness (civilisation, technology and force) defining itself against nature (savagery, primitiveness and weakness) characterised by otherness in the New World. She argues that a dominant theme in early American literature was ‘the highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man’ (1993:39). This worked by defining Europeans against a physical and figurative background of barbarity to better highlight their civilised status. Of the new man thus created, she writes: ‘The site of his transformation is within rawness: he is backgrounded by savagery’ (Ibid.:44). There were uncivilised ‘Others’ in the American ideological landscape against whose shadowy cultures Europeans could aim to whiten themselves. Wilkie (2001) notes that there was a cultural tension between slaves and their masters in 18th-19th century Louisiana over a range of practices including consumption of particular products, a tension generated by the paradox facing potentially upwardly-mobile black families: ‘to take advantage of the economic improvements made possible by the lifeworld of their community, they had to contribute to the destruction of that lifeworld’ (Ibid.:122).

Giroux (1998) detects a similar impetus in popular American culture. According to his reading, the film ‘Dangerous Minds’ demonstrates a sustained attempt to devalue and homogenise minority urban experience, and inculcate white middle-class values, presenting them as rational vis-à-vis irrational inner city youth. The film, he contends: ‘functions mythically to rewrite the decline of public schooling and the attack on poor, black, and Hispanic students as part of a broader project for rearticulating whiteness as a model of authority, rationality and civilized behaviour’ (Ibid.:63).

These very different trans-disciplinary studies generate sketches of the structurally uneven playing field upon which whiteness and blackness are constructed and relationally experienced. To divorce analyses of whiteness from the power relationships that frame it is to commit a cardinal error: it bears repeating that whiteness has historically functioned as a racial supremacist identity, fleetingly suspending the power relationships between genders and classes within the self-identifying ‘white’ group in order to unite them. This does not mean that acknowledging this caveat grants a licence to fall into the opposite error: that of supposing that whiteness actually suspends these relationships on a

permanent basis. We shall now explore the idea that whiteness can be examined as a set of resources.

Whiteness as Resources

Du Bois' 'psychological wages' can be cashed in a variety of ways; from McIntosh's 'knapsack' (1988) of free rides, through to Lipsitz's 'possessive investment' (1995) via Paynter (2001), who characterises whiteness as primarily cultural capital. Lipsitz maintains that the discrimination favouring whites in America combines structure and agency; with patterns of racist assumptions embedded in collective practices evidenced in housing segregation, unemployment patterns and access to institutional funding since the 1960s. Roediger (1991) stresses the amalgam of economic, social and cultural capital procured by European immigrants in urban America in the process of their becoming white. He ties this to the labour process and extends it to culture beyond the workplace. On one level then it might not be so surprising that whiteness has assumed such an allure that it can even be aspired to by black Others trapped in the colonisers' construction of them. Fanon (1967) explicitly deals with this desire to inhabit whiteness, while Winddance Twine's study of Brazil (1998) indicates that people whiten up in the Census to satisfy personal (yet collectively refuted) desires for privilege. Whiteness without blackness; freedom without slavery; civilisation without barbarity? The former deprived of the latter becomes meaningless, and this is the key to understanding how whiteness works, i.e. by continuously redefining itself as the polar opposite of non-whiteness. Similarly, 'freedom' for some depends on the 'unfreedom' of others, a relationship that Morrison (1993:57) terms 'the parasitical nature of white freedom'. If the holding of privilege is anchored in such shaky ground, the insecurity inherent in basing one's identity on such privilege may be identified. Given that whiteness is a phenomenon unthinkable in a context where white does not equal power at some structural level, the oppositional nature of whiteness-otherness begins to assume some degree of clarity. The economic and psychological wages of whiteness may be more meagre (and thus more precious) the lower down the social hierarchy the white subject is located.

The white ethnic 'backlash' of the 1980s and 90s (Winant, 1997) has provided a backdrop to the American research referred to in this paper. Indeed, Andersen (2003:22) explains the establishment of 'whiteness studies' partly as a product of debates in

America about increasing conservatism, racial politics and the idea of whites as a declining majority. Whiteness as a defensive identity vis-à-vis that of minority Others is a core theme of particularly illuminating studies such as Weis et al. (1996) and Hartigan (1999). However this strand marks one parameter of distinctiveness of the field of study in Europe. While current debates on immigration and asylum, with their undercurrents of racialised closure, can arguably be conceptualised as ‘backlash’ politics, the idea of whites as a declining majority is not relevant. In the following synthesis it should be assumed that we are seeking useful overriding themes rather than supposing that the debates and experiences map directly onto one another.

Weis et al’s (1996) de-industrialised white males define themselves as bearers of the traditional values of patriarchy, industriousness and patriotism, being engulfed and subsumed by amoral, family breakdown-ridden welfare-sponging minorities.^{viii} Hartigan’s self-styled ‘hillbillies’ in inner-city Detroit (1999, 1997a, 1997b) are far more ambivalent about their class location and their relationships with whites and minorities from better and worse-off neighbourhoods. The degree to which people were geographically and thus socially ‘at home’ greatly influenced the role that racialisation appeared to play in their interaction. Hartigan (1997a: 191) reports that when he told some interviewees that he was studying ‘race relations’, they directed him to a housing project across the highway, indicating that it was a zone too dangerous for whites:

‘In this [their own] neighbourhood they were one family among many, white and black, who held elaborate and lengthy knowledge of each other reaching back over the tumultuous past three decades. But across the intersection [i.e. in that particular project] they were simply ‘whites’, partly for their skin color and partly in terms of location and being out of place’.

The invisibility feared by Hartigan’s respondents thus thematically mirrors that of the black people whom Jones argues are objectified by whiteness (1997). Could similar factors influence the decisions of black British East End youths who side with their white counterparts in harassing local Bangladeshis, despite their temporary allies’ occasional anti-black racism (Hoggett et al., 1996: 113)? A similar collective choice also emerges from Back’s study of young people in South London estates, where a black-white solidarity against Vietnamese immigrants co-exists with considerable ambiguity

about whiteness on the part of many youths who have grown up in these multiracial settings (1996: 69-71).

Indeed, here we are approaching the complexity of whiteness that can be interpreted as a minor theme emerging from just over a decade of European studies of racism (Wieviorka, 1991; Back, 1996; Hoggett et al., 1996; Cole, 1997). In this research, white (mainly working-class) interviewees express ambivalence and nostalgia about values that were previously mainstays of white culture, now manifested in minority cultures; respect for (male) authority, work ethics, extended kinship networks and group solidarity (White, 2002).

In the precarious post-industrial low-income existence that is the lot of substantial numbers of contemporary British urban-dwellers, this ambivalence about racialisation and one's place in the pecking order coalesces around welfare (Cohen et al., 2002; Eurobarometer, 1997; 2000; MORI, 2004). This is one ideological breeding ground of what Delanty (2000) calls the 'new nationalism': anti-state in character, and propelled by concerns over resource allocation. Defence of beleaguered identity lies at the heart of the far-right project and has assumed an uneasy relationship with mainstream politics, which, since the late 80s, has increasingly sought to neutralise the far-right by adopting its racialising agenda (Gilroy, 1990; Taguieff, 1990).

In the light of the argument set out above then, the most illuminating way to view whiteness sociologically appears the following:

Whiteness as a Contingent Hierarchy

While one dimension of whiteness is its dialectic relationship with non-white othernesses, internal boundaries are equally evident. I would argue that whiteness can best be grasped as a contingent social hierarchy granting differential access to economic and cultural capital, intersecting with, and overlaying class and ethnicity (Wray and Newitz, 1997; Orsi, 1992; Jacobson, 1998; Hartigan, 1999, 1997a, 1997b), as well as gender and sexuality (Daniels, 1997; Frankenberg, 1994).

Studies of labour history (Roediger, 1991; Barrett and Roediger, 1997; Allen, 1994b) and of 'race' in the 19th century (Horsman, 1981; Saxton, 1990; Bernstein, 1990) suggest that whiteness is an over-arching mainstream value of Americanness, and that differential access to this resource was sought by successive waves of migrants learning the rules of the game (Barrett and Roediger, 2004; 2002). The 'white ethnic' phenomenon has thus provoked debate over the extent to which various ethnic groups can be considered 'white' (Brodkin, 1998; Guglielmo and Salerno, 2003). There is a counter-argument developed by some historians (Arnesen, 2001; Guglielmo, 2003) that European immigrants did not even have to 'become' white, relative to Blacks and Mexicans for example, and that the 'inbetween people' theory does withstand scrutiny. Sociologically, this debate is a red herring. The point is not to suggest that Irish, Italian and other European immigrants were not phenotypically white, which is why Guglielmo (2003) correctly identifies 'race' and colour as separate but overlapping criteria in late 19th and early 20th century American institutional definitions, but that ideologically and culturally they were indeed considered different and lesser 'white races'. The corollaries of this were not a set of life chances equivalent to those of Blacks, Native Americans or Hispanics, rather the obligation to define themselves as 'white' in a society where that mattered a great deal, whereas in their countries of origin, it had mattered scarcely at all. European immigrants thus 'became' white on arrival in the New World because they disembarked into a new set of social identities that articulated with those they had brought with them, and one overarching identity was whiteness.

Whiteness however is also mediated by class: we ignore this at the risk of taking the cultural turn away from the material base that I suggested should be adopted. Hartigan's (1999) study of Detroit clearly highlights the class-specific inflexions in the deployment of 'race' there. Class influences the way 'race' is spoken about, the meanings attached to it, and the ease with which racelessness can be invoked. Clearly, while enjoying the 'wages of whiteness', Americanised nouveau-white workers were, and many of their descendants are still, on a considerably lower 'wage' than other whites. Among the economic relationships between gender, class and 'race' since World War Two, Henwood (1997) finds statistical evidence that 'most officially poor people are white' (Ibid.:178), and that white males 'have watched their inherited skin and sex privileges wasting away for two decades' (Ibid.: 182)^{ix}. Behind the gross figures then there are

trends that alert us to the need to think more contextually about some forms of racialised power relationships. Du Bois' 'psychological and social' wage may well still be on offer, but for some, the differential is a lot less impressive than it was a generation ago. This perception of diminishing funds, resources and access to them, held particularly by people on lower-incomes across the EU may go some way toward explaining why the 'asylum-seeker' emerges from opinion polls as an envied competitor. It is one thing to correctly identify that such minorities may enjoy a minimum of economic capital and decision-making capacity in power structures, and another to take the concerns of lower-income workers seriously as positioned actors.

Racialisation does not always impact identically upon men and women. The gendered experiences of white women are catalogued in a vast corpus dating back to the early 1970s. Issues of class, employment and culture influence the forms of racialised identities imposed on and accepted by women. Moraga (1983), Frankenberg (1994), Mahoney (1997), Capello (1997) indicate some of the jagged intersections of whiteness, class, gender and sexuality and how they inscribe different patterns of oppression and consciousness.

While some women are to be 'defended' from others as reproducers of the 'race', other racialised women are constructed as 'sluts' or 'spongers' (Daniels, 1997). Moreover, sexuality is also used, not only in distinguishing between straight and gay white people, but as part of an arsenal of image-building deployed by the far-right outlets studied by Daniels (*ibid.*), who notes the ways in which Jewish men can be feminised and black men constructed as hyper-masculine threats to white women, symbols of purity and integrity. Kaur (2003) demonstrates that the reputations of white women in the context of a multiracial London district are contingent upon a complex of ideas held by men and women of the various groups, about how women should or shouldn't behave around men.

Five key formulations of whiteness emerging from the US studies have now been identified; a malevolent absence; an identity with content; a set of norms; resources; and a contingent hierarchy. These may overlap, and could each form the subject of an article. We will now briefly discuss some of these formulations in relation to Ireland before concluding.

Contexts of Whiteness: an Irish perspective ^x

The contexts in which whiteness has become a salient identity are not always ‘WASP’-dominated ones. In the Irish case, while this was indeed true of North America, and Britain, particularly in the 19th century, there are other settings such as the Caribbean (Garner, 2003), which had slightly different sets of norms, and contemporary Ireland, where the key ones are secular catholic and sedentarist, evolving from the relationship between settled and Travelling people. The intimacy of the relationship between the Church and governments until quite recently has left Irish social policy with a specific flavour (Powell, 1992; O’Carroll, 2002).

The English colonisation of Ireland was propelled from the 1560s onwards by a zealous and violence-sanctioning form of Protestantism among new colonists (Canny, 1976) ^{xi} Another key area was the discrepancy between sedentary urban existence (represented by English civilisation) and the semi-nomadic transhumance farming of the Gaelic Irish peasantry. The later racialisation of Jews and Travellers can be interpreted as a function of such themes becoming internalised by the Irish. Hostility toward Jews stems partly from Catholic teachings (until the late 60s, Irish children were taught that Jews were deicides) and partly from their location as cosmopolitan and rootless migrants perceived as un-patriotic and materially-focused. Travellers, as Ní Shuínéar (2002) argues, are victims of ideas similar to those deployed by the English in the 16th century. These state that nomads are pre-modern bearers of dirt, disease and immorality. Moreover, the acceleration of the process in which public space is diminishing due to suburbanisation and expanding road networks means that in 21st century Ireland, land is at a premium price. Travellers’ space, upon which their culture depends, is dwindling.

We will examine two of the remaining four areas identified in the previous sections (‘resources’ and ‘contingent hierarchy’), as examples of how whiteness brings different angles of approach to the sociology of racism.

Whiteness as Resources

In the EU, Australasia and North America the Irish have been privileged immigrants because of their whiteness (Lubhéid, 1997; Corcoran, 1997). Within the Spanish and British empires, the Irish assumed privileged positions relative to the subject peoples, e.g. in India (as administrators and soldiers), and the Caribbean (as businesspeople, land and slave-owners). Social mobility has thus been an option not open to most non-whites. Missionary activity in Africa (Rolston and Shannon, 2002) also demonstrates a dominant relationship between some Irish people and subject peoples of Empire, even whilst the Irish as a nation were also a subaltern group. Without disagreeing with Hickman (1998) and Mac an Ghail (2001) about the focus of UK literature on 'race' neglecting anything but black-white relations, I would argue that white migrants now occupy a different space within the hierarchy, albeit one primarily defined in terms of a lack of constraints: The Irish, like other EU nationals, are not subject to the same travel and work restrictions as legally-resident non-EU nationals, a large proportion of whom are non-white. These freedoms constitute an enormous stake in the European Union: we should conceptualise this as a form of racially-encoded invisibility.

Whiteness as a Contingent Hierarchy

While the Irish forms of whiteness encompassed religious affiliation and a relationship to the Irish language, culture was explicitly and actively bound to nationalist activity only between the 1890s and the emergence of the Republic in 1922. It was then that the boundaries between the content of Irish whiteness and others were simultaneously stressed (*vis-à-vis* Anglo-Saxons and Jews) and strategically neglected: inclusion in the white supremacist project of Empire as a civilised white member was actively proposed in the campaign for Home Rule. So while materialistic anglo-saxonism is criticised as the obverse of spiritual celticism in Arthur Griffith's writing, for example, the differences are perceived as less important than the similarities in relation to other colonised areas of Empire. 'White', in a nutshell, trumps 'Celtic': hence support for the Boers as white imperial subjects struggling to remove the British yoke, the emphasis placed by Irish Nationalist MPs on Ireland's participation in empire (Hennessey, 1998) and the drawing

of parallels between Ireland and the 'white' Dominions. Similarly, while defending catholic culture from attack by WASP norms in the USA, the Irish collectively bought into whiteness as a means of asserting normative Americanness (Barrett and Roediger, 2002; 2004): hence pro-slavery, anti-Chinese immigrant attitudes and willingness to engage in clearing the Mid-West of Native Americans.

An examination of the Irish experience demonstrates that whiteness is a constructed and fluid identity. At particular times in the experience of the Irish in the Caribbean, North America, European empires, the UK and contemporary Ireland, they have been various combinations of Celtic, Catholic, Protestant, Gaelic, 'off-white' and white at particular moments. Yet however complex the patterns of identification, whiteness has always provided the most potent resources within a given context, granting membership of dominant groups, and relatively privileged access to resources such as employment, housing, and education. While a group can be racialised as uncivilised and unworthy of voting rights or statehood in particular situations by other white racialised groups, the boundaries between dominant and dominated whites can also become minimal and sometimes irrelevant given other circumstances. The mainstreaming of Irish-Americans as Southern and Eastern European immigration to the USA increased from the end of the 19th century provides one such example.

Conclusions: The Uses of Whiteness in European Contexts

Whiteness thus emerges from the work surveyed as a fluid, contingent and contested identity, simultaneously constitutive of non-white Others, yet fragmented into degrees of belonging (to communities based on place, class, nation and 'race'). This conclusion raises questions whose answers can be placed at the core of a research agenda in Europe:

Firstly, what does 'whiteness' tell us about the socio-economic conditions in which it matters? May particularly acute types of competition for social, cultural and economic capital (or at least those in which this competition is *perceived* to be acute) frame the increased salience of the defensive and anti-state 'new nationalism' (Delanty, 2000), whose defining racialised Others are of all colours? Europe has been the site for migrations of white Europeans for centuries, and focusing on the *longue durée* is a more appropriate stance than problematising the post-war period differently because so many migrants came from former colonies. On the contrary, the majorities of migrants to

some nations (e.g. Ireland) and significant minorities in others (e.g. France, Germany, Portugal) are still white Europeans.

Secondly, since the relationships between whiteness and non-whiteness (whether blackness, jewishness, or nomadism in Europe) emerge as mutually constitutive, how can we chart and explain their temporal and spatial distinctiveness? These relationships should be imagined as dynamic and susceptible to negotiation and resistance rather than fixed (Back, 1996). 'Whiteness' can help account for both vernacular and international aspects of the othering discourses identified here.

Since the hierarchies within the groups referred to as 'white' reveal the situational and intersecting nature of power, the challenge in research terms is to find a set of foci that capture the ways in which power and disempowerment are lived by people with differing relationships to social, economic and cultural capital. This approach further underlines the need to combine empirical studies with those concentrating on mapping the actors' constructions of their life worlds. Could we therefore begin to explain the adoption of 'white' values by non-whites such as the investment in racist attacks on and resentment toward third groups (Hoggett et al., 1996; Back, 1996), and the historical phenomenon of 'off-white' and/or black groups venting class-derived hostility on different groups of Others?^{xii}

Thirdly, the historical distinctiveness of Europe's imperial past and the military and technological confrontations of colonists with people from outside Europe must be critically analysed in terms of its role in producing whiteness. The relationship may well be more complex than a typology containing countries with empires and those without. The Irish example overflows with ambiguities generated by the simultaneous position of 'subject race' and proxy member of the dominant racial group. Moreover, McMaster (2001:58-85) suggests that countries with no first-hand imperial experience could have witnessed the construction of racialised ideas similar to those found elsewhere in the nineteenth century, a phenomenon he terms 'blackness without Blacks'. The sociological problem is to examine how the colonial past provides material for contemporary actors' understandings of difference.

Lastly, from an emancipatory perspective, how can using 'whiteness' as a concept be an instrument of the struggle against racism? It must be acknowledged that whiteness can equal terror: the possibility of writing rules to suit white people, changing them when

they don't have the desired effect, and being able to benefit so much from structural inequalities that non-whites die younger, are less likely to realise potential and grow up in an environment where the over-riding ethos is one where they are devalued merely for existing. Any discussion of the intricacies of white internal boundaries must always occur with the shadow of social death hanging over those who do not fit into the category 'white'.

The objective of doing such research in Europe (taking into account its necessary focus on the way host country nationals construct their identities) is to juggle the intellectual and political stakes whose parameters are on one side, a structure of over-arching power relations in which generally, white dominates black, with, on the other, a sociological imagination refusing to conceptualise whiteness as an unchanging essence. This therefore poses the problem in terms of the internal boundaries of whiteness; ethnicity, class and gender. The whiteness paradigm helps liberate us from the tyranny of the black-white 'race relations' polarity that constrains our capacity to encompass a variety of experiences of oppression and name them.

Yet the idea is not to subordinate the study of racisms to whiteness, rather to place whiteness within the confines of the material-ideological elements of studies of racism^{xiii}: contradictory and counter-intuitive material may emerge, showing 'whiteness' inhabited by actors who find themselves both oppressed and oppressing along axes such as class, gender, yet dominant on lines of 'race' alone. It would also be useful to focus some studies on higher class locations, as whiteness studies have hitherto concentrated almost exclusively on de-industrialised working class whites.

Pursuing this critical line might make it possible to retain an analysis of 'whiteness' as a potentially emancipatory tool for understanding how racism impacts on the freedom of all groups, and for suggesting fresh perspectives on how to combat it. Simultaneously asking 'what is whiteness?' and deconstructing the idea that anyone is 'white' at all, is a tough act, but it might help mollify Baldwin's ghost, his accusatory finger pointing Banquo-like at academics and activists: 'If you think you're white, there's no hope for you'.^{xiv}

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Endnotes

- ⁱ There are also bodies of work on whiteness developing elsewhere, such as Latin America, as Bonnett (2003) refers to. Incorporation of this work into the paradigm is a future project. The background to this article is preparation for work on an ESRC-funded project (2004-07) investigating the construction of white identities in contemporary Britain. Further work on the existing UK-focussed literature will follow.
- ⁱⁱ Although principally drawn from sociology, the work necessarily encompasses other disciplines. Sociology has been a latecomer to whiteness studies; Dyer is a film critic, Morrison a literary critic, hooks a cultural critic, etc. The ideas they place in the debate however can be dealt with sociologically.
- ⁱⁱⁱ These lines of thought intersect. Ellison's invisibility is an individualised version of the collective form alluded to by Jones, and the evacuation of human characteristics echoes the schoolroom scene in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) in which Sethe overhears the class being instructed to draw up lists of her 'human' and 'animal' characteristics.
- ^{iv} Jones uses the examples of Rodney King, Bernard Goetz (the New York 'vigilante' killer), and the Charles Stuart case in Boston: Stuart and his brother murdered his wife and blamed it on a fictional black mugger.
- ^v The example of the Saint Patrick's Battalion, who changed sides in the Mexican Wars is one notable exception.
- ^{vi} This review focuses on Anglophone America. The story was not so clear cut in the Spanish and Portuguese New Worlds.
- ^{vii} This corresponds roughly to the work on Caribbean islands where slave numbers overtook those of Europeans at around the same time. Prior distinctions between English, Scots and Irish in Barbados, Jamaica and the Leewards evaporate as the white identity of the Europeans vis-à-vis the black slaves becomes more important (Beckles, 1990).
- ^{viii} The implicit critique of affirmative action (from beleaguered white males) seems to mirror a broader contemporary trend of distaste for affirmative action (Savage, 2003).
- ^{ix} This, as Henwood stresses, is occurring in the context of greater racialised polarisation and enduring racial discrimination.
- ^x This section draws heavily on my work on the development of the idea of 'race' in the Irish context: 'Racism in the Irish Experience' (2003).
- ^{xi} This consists of switching from 'social' explanations of difference, i.e. redemption through exposure to English customs, to the 'natural', i.e. racialised accounts, in which no amount of exposure will transform the inherently 'Wild' Irish.

^{xii} I am thinking here of the US context; immigrants joining with Nativists to oppose Chinese immigration in the 1880s, and African-Americans and Latinos attacking Asian-American businesses in the LA riots.

^{xiii} The collection edited by Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003) therefore provides a more compelling model for sociologists than either Delgado and Stefancic (1997) or Hill (1997), in descending order.

^{xiv} Film: *The Price of the Ticket*, 1985.