

Whiteness as a Flexible Social Category

In the mid-1800s there was an awful blight among potatoes in Ireland. The Great Potato Famine caused large amounts of Irish immigrants to move to the Land of Opportunity. At that time, the government was acknowledging three races on the census: white, black, and, strangely, mulatto. But although Irish people could check “white” on the form, the Irish in general experienced the same kind of racial discrimination that blacks did: they were restricted from working in some places or patronizing certain businesses, their “Irishness” was linked to behavioral traits like “laziness” and “savagery,” and they were stereotyped and mocked in the media. But one thing that the Irish had that blacks did not: they could pass. So although the first generation of Irish immigrants were undeniably Irish, the second and third learned how to de-emphasize their Irishness and emphasize their Americanness. Lots of them became agents of the state: that’s why you had all those cartoons when we were kids of Irish policemen. By the time the wave of Italian and Eastern European immigrants came in the 1920s, Irish people were just considered “white.” They made the choice that gave them and their children the most access to all that America had to offer.

In the early 20th century, there were a lot of reports put out by various government agencies about a rise in crime in the cities. America’s cities were swelling because of: European immigration; migration of Southern blacks moving to cities to work in factories during the war; and banks were putting the squeeze on farms, forcing more and more rural sons and daughters to move to the city. With this swell of people, the people in lower economic neighborhoods dealt with high crime. This was largely due to the fact that there were a lot of broken families, and young people formed gangs for protection and easy money. The Irish and Italian gangs in the *Gangs of New York* fighting for control of the streets is an example. So most low-income areas in cities were a mix of poor whites, blacks, and Asian and Latino immigrants, many with their own neighborhoods. My old professor Khalil Muhammad wrote an amazing book called *Condemnation of Blackness* that explains what happened next. To make it short: Because of the high crime rate, many social-service agencies started to create programs to benefit the poor. However, blacks were very consciously excluded from this outreach because they were the ones who became portrayed as the criminals in these mixed neighborhoods. The social-service agencies saw themselves as protecting poor peoples of European descent from poor blacks, and so these groups were in a sense “brought up” into whiteness. There weren’t any statistics to show that blacks committed crimes at a higher rate than any other poor people, but the agencies got momentum by convincing the public that the blacks moving into the cities from the South were a menace that they should be protected from. That motivated people to support the agencies. One of the big challenges that poor Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, etc., did not face that blacks, Asians, and most Latinos (unless they looked like Ricky Ricardo) did, was housing discrimination. Before housing regulations were put in to stop it, real estate agents and landlords completely controlled where people could and could not live. So even if dark-skinned people could afford to move out of low-income areas, they were restricted in where they could move. People of European descent could and often did de-emphasize their ethnic heritage, and moved to higher-income areas or, by the 1950s, the suburbs. The depopulation of the city by people who identify as white has created the demographic of the inner city we see today.