On The Making of White American Identity: Ron Eyerman and Eric Taylor Woods in Conversation

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Abstract

In this article, Eric Taylor Woods asks Ron Eyerman about the motivations, methods, and ideas that informed the writing of his recent book, *The Making of White American Identity* (2022). The conversation focuses particularly on the significance of racism, the Civil War, and popular culture in the founding and sustaining of white American identity as a mobilizing force in American politics. Along the way, Woods and Eyerman discuss the comparability of white American identity with other collective identities, including Northern Irish Unionism; Serbian Identity; and Afrikaner Identity. The aim of printing this conversation is to provoke further research and debate on the cultural sociology of white American identity.

Keywords

America, American Civil War, racism, Ron Eyerman, white American identity, whiteness

Introduction

In *The Making of White American Identity* (2022), Ron Eyerman brings together his diverse expertise in the fields of social movements, sociology of art, and cultural trauma, to understand why appeals for the defence of white American identity continue to have the power to upend American politics. Eyerman shows how ideas about the supremacy of white people in America never truly faded in the 20th and 21st centuries – rather, they

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were sustained by networks of activists, writers, musicians, politicians, conservative media, and, most recently, new digital communication platforms. Through close analysis of numerous texts, Eyerman further argues that the American Civil War, particularly the collective memory of defeat, has been an enduring – and highly affective – cultural resource.

Among the more compelling theoretical innovations in this book is the distinction between 'cool' and 'hot' racism (pp. 6–8). Whereas the former is an institutionalized, apolitical, and largely unremarked (by white people) form of racism, the latter is highly affective, self-conscious, and political. Eyerman demonstrates how the ebb and flow of American history has been deeply marked by a dynamic relationship between these two forms of racism. Ultimately, Eyerman's book provides an explanation for why white American identity has suddenly returned so explosively on the political scene, and it serves as a warning for observers who think that it will simply fade away with time.

In what follows, Eric Taylor Woods discusses these themes, among others, with Ron Eyerman. The discussion is a reprint of a conversation that originally took place over email. By reprinting the conversation in this journal, our hope is that it will provoke further research and debate in the cultural sociology of white American identity.

Eric: Correct me if I am wrong, but I get the impression that you have been circling the topic of white American identity for quite some time. What motivated you to finally undertake this project?

Ron: Yes, that is true. As I mention in the Preface [of *The Making of White American Identity*], Paul Gilroy reacted to my earlier book on the making of African American identity by remarking that one could not fully appreciate that development without considering white American identity. That was more than twenty years ago, but I have now given my response! There were also significant events, such as the violent confrontation at Charlottesville Virginia in 2017 and the assault on the Capitol building in January 2021 that stimulated my consternation. My interest in the topic is much more than academic and I hope that is clearly expressed in the text. This is a work of memory as well as history, but the intent is clearly political. This is a scholarly work with a practical interest.

Eric: One reason I found your approach to white American identity to be so compelling is that you use an historical perspective. Not only does this perspective demonstrate the remarkable persistence through time of several core traditions of white American identity, but – I think – it also helps to shed light on why white American identity can provoke such a powerful emotional response when it is perceived to be threatened. I think that it is here that your argument that the South's defeat in the Civil War provided a foundational 'primal scene' (p. 50) for subsequent iterations of white American identity is particularly persuasive. Can you elaborate on how and why this 'trauma of defeat' (p. 50) – as you describe it – has proved to be such an enduring and central feature of white American identity?

Ron: Like victory, defeat can provide an emotionally powerful resource in the construction of collective identity and the mobilization of collective action. I

learned this in part from Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Culture of Defeat* (2003), which includes a chapter on the American South, and from Bernhard Giesen (2004), who discusses national foundation narratives through the binary of triumph and tragedy. When framed as a moral victory, a heroic struggle for a righteous cause that is vanquished through immoral or devious means, military defeat can serve as a mobilizing force in a renewed struggle for redemption. As Kai Erikson (1991) proposed, trauma can destroy, but also create community. With all its romantically infused symbolism, the Southern cause in the American Civil War has proven just such a resource. This was a war after all to defend white supremacy and maintain a slave-based society; recalling its 'just cause' gives contemporary white supremacists a very compelling historical reference. Waving the Southern rebel flag and protesting the removal of heroic monuments lends historical meaning to contemporary mobilization.

Eric: However, while the recollection of defeat can provide a powerful symbolic resource for sustaining solidarity, your book suggests that this kind of memory also has a dark side. It is striking how memories of suffering and defeat became so central to Southern white Americans, at the same time that they were perpetrating terrible violence against black Americans. On this score, there seems to be similarities between white American identity and Afrikaner identity, in which memories of defeat co-exist with a long history of racist violence against black Africans (Verwey and Quayle, 2012). I'm curious about your thoughts here. When memories of defeat become central to a community's collective identity does it make that community particularly closed to perceived outsiders – to the point of being particularly capable of violence against them if they are perceived as a threat?

Ron: What an interesting thought. I do not think that tragic narratives, those that stem from the defeat of a community, necessarily make the community that rises from its ashes any more closed or prone to violence than one that builds on triumphant grounds. My current research concerns in part the aftermath of violent conflict in Northern Ireland and those states that made up the former Yugoslavia. In the latter we have the case of Serbian nationalism which is built around defeat in the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, when Christians under the leadership of Serbian prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic were defeated by Ottoman armies (Spasić, 2016 [2011]). Lazar became a saint and hero to the Serbian people and the lost battle is celebrated every year in rousing ethnocentric ceremonies. This mythic defeat served to mobilize and legitimate the bombing of cities and mass murder, particularly of Muslims whom they referred to as 'Turks' during the Yugoslav Wars of Succession (1991–1995). Yet, the extremist Protestant nationalists in Northern Ireland formed their founding narratives around victory, the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, when Protestant armies under the leadership of King William III (William of Orange) defeated the armies of Catholic King James II of England and Ireland. The marches that occur each year to commemorate this victory tread triumphantly through Catholic neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland, marking off their community with loud drums

and other symbolic instruments. This too, led to violent confrontation and some would say genocidal threat during what is known as the Troubles. One may turn defeat into a heroic narrative of noble loss and redemption that can be as emotionally compelling as one built around triumph, but not necessarily more so. There are several factors to consider, most particularly the ability of well-placed carrier groups, elites including artists and intellectuals, to construct and distribute a compelling narrative that is transmissible over generations.

Eric: Your current project sounds like a very interesting continuation of your work! I too was thinking about Serbian identity, and the way in which a myth of defeat was used to inflame hatred against Muslims. At first blush, the symbolic role played by defeat in that case seems broadly comparable to both white American identity and Afrikaner identity. I wonder if there are also similarities here with Israeli identity, in which the memory of the Holocaust is used by Israeli right-wingers to reinforce ethnic and religious boundaries with Palestinians (Alexander and Dromi, 2015). In all these cases, memories of suffering and defeat seem to pair quite effectively with the subjugation of perceived outsiders. However, you bring up a good point that the case of Protestant/Unionist identity in Northern Ireland does not follow this pattern.

Perhaps there is something else that is common to these cases that is driving a proclivity for suspicion and violence against perceived outsiders – I'm thinking here that each of them seems to be characterized by a heightened anxiety that their communities are threatened by outside forces. Perhaps this perception is feeding a deeper sense of 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens, 1991) about the place of their communities in the world and, in turn, drawing them inward and hardening their boundaries with perceived outsiders? For example, while the Protestants of Northern Ireland until very recently comprised a majority in Ulster, they are nevertheless a minority in Ireland as a whole and, more importantly, their relationship with Britain often seems tenuous at best. However, all this being said, I fear that I have led this conversation too far astray from the topic of white American identity!

If we can return to your book, I am wondering if you can comment on how a collective identity that was born among Southern whites came to be taken up by white northerners, such that you write about a white American identity writ large, rather than distinguishing between Southern and Northern white identities. It is remarkable that a collective identity that was constituted by defeat can come to be adopted by the very community that was responsible for inflicting that defeat. In my own recent book on the topic (with Schertzer, 2022), I built upon on research on whiteness (i.e. Brodkin, 1998; Painter, 2010; Roediger, 1991) to argue that white southerners and white northerners were ultimately drawn together following the Civil War because of a shared racist antipathy to black Americans and other people of colour. However, this argument says little about precisely *how* this occurred. Clearly there needed to be much cultural work on this front, particularly on the part of white northerners, who needed to somehow replace a collective identity built upon triumph with one built upon defeat.

Ron: I agree with the argument you make in your book. It was also made by the historian David Blight (2002), whose work on the post-Civil War reconciliation between Northern and Southern whites at the expense of fully integrating the former enslaved I draw upon. In the long aftermath of the war there occurred a reconciliation between the former enemies and the war itself was re-narrated as an American war, one between brothers, whose differences could now be overcome. The rehabilitation of the South and the Confederate cause began in the decades following the war with the erection of memorials to the fallen leaders of the rebellion as American, not merely heroes of the Southern cause. The issue of slavery was gently pushed aside and the causes of the war identified as a battle over the rights of individual states to determine their own destiny, a conflict as old as the nation itself. The Southern leaders were thus defending the Constitution, not destroying it. They were patriots with a different point of view. History books were written to reflect this interpretation of the causes and meaning of the war. As an American war, there were now 'good men' on both sides. That these 'men' were white was unspoken but clearly understood. The reconciliation was consummated through finding a common enemy in the Spanish American war in the 1890s, where Southern military traditions were refreshed and reincorporated into the nation. Popular culture, novels and films played an important role in this entire process and I spend a great deal of space illustrating this.

Let me offer a few examples of the role popular culture played in this process of rehabilitation. The most obvious are two well-known films, *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*. While the former romanticized Southern life and the ways of the plantation elite, the latter bolstered the alternative history to the Civil War. *Gone with the Wind* first appeared as a bestselling novel in 1936 and was then transformed into one of the most popular films of all time three years later. The two films are interlinked in their historical subject matter, but more importantly in their being fictions couched in an ideology that reflects and represents a world and a worldview. They both make truth claims: this is a world we lost, a world that could have persisted. As one Southern film critic wrote after viewing *Gone with the Wind*, 'The Lost Cause will never be lost'. There were many other popular novels and films that were produced over the years that carried the same message, though perhaps not as explicitly.

There are other forms of popular culture, in addition to film and literature, that have been carriers of white consciousness and supremacy such as popular music and television programming. I offer examples from country music, which is less explicit in its aims, and white power music, which is very explicit in those aims. I also point to the material means through which these forms and their messages are disseminated, such as radio, cable television and the internet. The right to free speech, protected through the First Amendment to the Constitution, is a foundational right of American democracy. Along with the decentralization and deregulation of mass media production and distribution, this has contributed to the articulation and dissemination of white identity or white consciousness, including white supremacy and its defence.

The possibility of a white supremacist media echo chamber is protected under the right to free speech, as long as it is to express an opinion. What began as a marginal discourse, as 'white talk radio' or local recording studios for white power music, has now evolved into a major force in American political culture. An evolution from the margins to the mainstream.

Eric: The role played by racism in the re-forging of white American identity following the Civil War gets at one of the more forceful arguments in your book: that racism – or, more specifically, the belief that America is fundamentally for white people – is central to white American identity. Across numerous examples, you show the powerful mobilizing potential of this belief when it is perceived to be threatened. And yet I imagine there will be readers – particularly white American readers – who would not recognize themselves in this characterization of white American identity. Can you comment on this seeming paradox – that racism can be so important to white American identity, at the same time that many, if not most, white Americans reject this characterization of their collective identity?

Ron: One of the central themes of the book is to distinguish white privilege as a taken for granted sense of entitlement, white consciousness as the articulation and justification of the entitlement, and white supremacy that calls for its righteous defence. White privilege can be taken for granted because it is institutionalized, meaning that a white person does not have to think about the privilege skin colour affords, one can go so far as to deny it or relegate it to the past, say to the pre-Civil Rights era or before the country elected a black president. The latter can be called a progressive view of American history, where past problems and injuries have been or will be reconciled. As you suggest, many white Americans share this view and defend such policies as Affirmative Action and anti-discrimination legislation to correct residual policies that guarantee white privilege. It is precisely that vision of America and its history that white supremacists and white nationalists challenge as they identify it as an existential threat that must be forcefully dealt with. There are a range of methods to make this challenge, such as confrontations over schoolbooks and course content, to mass mobilization and collective violence. This is exactly what is currently manifesting itself before our eyes, a struggle between contrasting visions of the American dream. Few deny that whiteness has meaning in past and present America, the issue is what the future will look like. Will 'white' remain an administrative category, a box to check on the national census, or an existential condition that is threatened with elimination and in need of defending? This is the issue that is being forced in the paradox you mention, with whites being asked, which side are you on?

Eric: I think we have space for one last question. I wanted to ask how you navigate the ethics of this kind of research. In your preface you write, 'this book was not easy to write, its topic being so distasteful [. . .]' (p. vii) I totally recognize this sentiment. I felt it acutely when I was writing a book on the role of Anglican mission schools in the forced assimilation and abuse of Indigenous

communities in Canada (Woods, 2016). In order to understand the Anglican community's motivations, like you, I drew upon theories of perpetrator trauma to go 'inside' the community and reconstruct the meanings that it associated with the schools. However, I felt that there were risks associated with this approach. I continually asked myself if I was inadvertently encouraging empathy for the perpetrators at the expense of the victims. Ultimately, I decided that if I could, in some small way, contribute to understanding the perpetrators' motivations, then it was worth the risk. However, I am still not completely sure if I was right.

Ron: As I wrote in a previous answer, this book is a work of memory as well as history, with a political intent. That might pose ethical difficulties, but not, I believe, of the sort you mention. I cannot imagine anyone coming away from my book with the feeling, so opportunistically expressed by Donald Trump, that there are 'good people on both sides'. While one should always try to understand what motivates those who think very differently than oneself, I cannot empathize with those who are blinded by hatred or rank opportunism, however much they may think of themselves as victims or guided by good intentions. This however refers only to a small radical extreme of white nationalists, those who use violence to foster their aims. Those who identify as white and seek to defend white privilege by other means than violence may well be open to empathetic dialogue which would ground itself on understanding and in mutual respect. I end the book with a few examples and recommendations as to how this may occur. One such example concerns the decision-making process that eventually underpinned the removal of Confederate memorials and symbols in Virginia, the site of the Charlottesville protests. Here the democratic and legal processes that ground the American nation performed as they were intended, giving voice and the possibility to influence to all those concerned through formal procedure. This illustrates the importance of the law and independent political and legal institutions in mediating polarized groups. It also reveals the importance of regulated democratic processes, in which open accountability is valued and displayed. Another example concerns the confrontations at local school boards, where debates about the teaching of American history, race and racism are ongoing. Like the city councils of the previous example, school boards are places where grassroots democracy is practised in the United States. I argue that in order for such democratic processes to truly reflect local voices, they need to be kept free from opportunistic intervention by outside interests. Strong, independent regulating institutions, like non-partisan school boards and governmental agencies, are necessary to ensure this and prevent the opportunistic usage of local democratic processes to inflame and trigger wider polarization.

Funding

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Author biographies

Ron Eyerman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Yale University, USA, and affiliated with the Department of Sociology at the University of Lund, Sweden. He is the author of *The Making of White American Identity* (2022); *Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (2019), *Cultural Trauma* (2001), and *Music and Social Movements* (1998), among many other titles. His interests include cultural and social movement theory, critical theory, cultural studies, and the sociology of the arts.

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