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Dr. Mark Naison

Whenever I engage in conversations about race with Irish, Jewish or Italian New Yorkers of my generation- or those slightly younger- I am likely to confront some variety of the following argument, "I am sick of all this talk about white privilege. Not only did my immigrant ancestors have nothing to do with slavery and segregation, but they faced terrible discrimination when they came here. Moreover, they climbed out of poverty- and finally won acceptance- through generations of hard work, not by asking for handouts or special help from the government. Frankly, I am tired of Black people holding us hostage as though they are the only ones who suffered. If they have problems, it is their own fault."

I would be lying if I told you that I have developed a successful response to such comments. People who express such sentiments are deeply invested in the aura of injured innocence they convey. Talking about how the wealth accumulated by slavery made the immigration of their ancestors possible is too abstract to make headway with people who pride themselves on their practicality and common sense. Plus, this all happened almost two hundred years ago.

However, the more research I do on Bronx history, and the more discussions i have with my students about this subject, the more I realize that Irish, Italian and Jewish New Yorkers reaped huge advantages over their Black counterparts in post-World War 2 New York, advantages which accelerated their movement into the middle class in a period of unprecedented economic expansion. Black New Yorkers also progressed during these critical years-1945-1960- but their rate of progress was sharply limited by discrimination they faced in housing and employment markets, discrimination that, ironically, was often imposed by people whose ethnic background once made them the targets of discrimination themselves.

Nowhere was this more visible than in the explosion of middle-income housing in NYC and environs after the Second World War. In addition to entirely new suburban communities such as Levittown Long Island, you had middle income apartment complexes such as Parkchester in the Bronx, Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan, the Trump Houses in Coney Island, and the Levitt apartments in Queens. If you add to these the four miles of beautiful apartment buildings along the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, you have the portrait of a great American success story of upward mobility and middle-class ascendency. You can also see this a triumph of assimilation as the overwhelming majority of occupants of this housing were Irish Jewish and Italian.

However, such a celebratory portrait can only be sustained by ignoring one stubborn fact--Every single one of these housing complexes, which in total contained hundreds of thousands of residents, maintained "white only" policies and kept Black tenants and home buyers out. If you were Black even if you had a good income, even if you were eligible for loans from the GI Bill, you couldn't rent an apartment along the Grand Concourse, in Parkchester or Stuyvesant town, in the Trump or Levitt Houses, and you couldn't buy a home in Levittown. Worse yet, these policies, challenged by civil rights groups through lawsuits and complaints to Human Rights Commissions, didn't change until the 1960's.
And just in case someone asked, the people who enforced these policies, as well as those who lived in the communities in question, were not Southern segregationists, but Irish, Jewish and Italian New Yorkers who once faced discrimination themselves!

You see a similar pattern in post-world war 2 labor markets. Three of the most vibrant industries in post war NYC were construction, banking and insurance. Black people were completely excluded from all three of these industries until the late 1960's, and while you could argue that banking and insurance were for the most park white Protestant enclaves, in which Irish and Jewish people had created hard won enclaves, construction in NYC, in the post war era, almost exclusively employed Irish and Italian workers, especially in the most highly skilled categories And here you have a terrible irony- construction in NYC after WW 2, entirely populated by the descendants of once despised European immigrants, enforced a lily white policy that limited access of Black people to the highest paying blue collar jobs in NYC. Think about what you have just read: when you limit access to the best housing and the best jobs in a city on the basis of race, you are severely handicapping the economic progress of those facing these bans.

These were barriers Black people faced alone in post war NYC. Their Irish, Jewish and Italian counterparts didn't suffer the same fate when color lines were drawn. And sadly, tragically, they were often the ones drawing the lines