

Blinded by the Facts: The Reworking of Whiteness in the Dillingham Commission (1907-1911)¹

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Abstract

Existing studies of whiteness has focused on whether and how certain immigrant groups became white over time, and what the question implies for the saliency of the color line in the United States. In the process, however, whiteness has often been portrayed merely as a label for group identity, the meaning of which have remained ubiquitous and unchanging throughout immigration history. By introducing the framework of sociology of knowledge and expertise, this paper aims to highlight a different dimension of whiteness. Simply put, whiteness is far from a natural fact, but a product social construction, in which racial ideologues, experts, and empirical data interact to produce a notion of peoplehood. Such process was far from straightforward: racism alone was not enough to produce a coherent and valid racial category, and often times racial ideologues had to wrestle and make compromise with experts and facts that defied their limited vision of the social world based on prejudice. Drawing on the case of the Dillingham Commission (1907-1911), a Congressional investigation that attempted to collect comprehensive data on immigrants living in the United States, this paper presents an account of how experts and facts clashed with the racial ideology of White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (WASP) supremacy. The Commission's goal was to portray immigrants from southern and eastern Europe (SEEs) as "undesirable races" that should be excluded from entering the country. To this end, the Commission developed a racial classification scheme to distinguish them from other immigrants, and collected the data to demonstrate their supposed undesirable qualities. However, the data did not support the Commission's initial intentions, and its nativist leaders had to contend with experts and facts that defied their vision of the United States as an Anglo-Saxon nation. Tracing this process, this paper narrates the process through which whiteness emerged in the early twentieth century at the intersection of racial ideology, social science expertise, and empirical data, not just as an intended effect of racism but also as a by-product of knowledge production.

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