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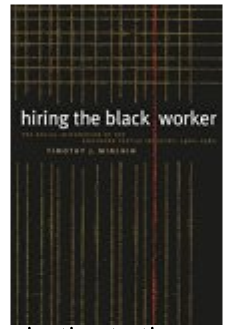
Timothy Minchin. *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xii + 342 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4771-8; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2470-2.



Reviewed by Thomas Lyons (American Bar Foundation)
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African Americans were excluded from employment in the Southern textile industry for most of this century. Before 1965, they made up little more than two percent of its employees. At first glance this fact is unsurprising since economic life throughout the South was strictly segregated, with blacks occupying poorly paid laborer jobs whenever they worked in the same industries with whites. But from an economic point of view the exclusion of African Americans from textiles is surprising indeed. The textile industry was the largest manufacturing industry in the South and one of the most competitive. Most production jobs in the mills required little skill. Hence the pressure of competition might be expected to force textile mills, more than any other industry, to hire African Americans.

Timothy Minchin has written an impressive historical survey which demonstrates that the textile industry was integrated only through the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the lawsuits that followed it. Minchin, who teaches American history at St. Andrew's University in Scotland, compiles internal industry data, legal documents, and dozens of interviews with the first black textile workers in order to show that mills kept blacks completely out of production jobs until after the Civil Rights Act came into effect in 1965. Although anecdotal rather than statistical, the evidence for the importance of the Act is overwhelming: employees, and employers themselves, openly state that the federal statute was the only reason any black workers were hired. Hence Minchin's book establishes the efficacy of the Civil Rights Act in bringing blacks into this industry.

But the book suffers a failing common in labor history: the consequences of this conclusion are to some extent buried under the wealth of fascinating testimony. Economists since Gary Becker have tended to view racial discrimination as an aberration in the market that must be explained. All other things being equal, discrimination against a given racial group is inefficient, since it translates into a wage premium paid to the members of the favored group. Minchin is aware of this received theoretical wisdom and considers one alternative to the Civil Rights Act–the possibility that mill owners faced an increasingly tight labor market in the late 1960s which forced them to hire blacks. He notes that while overall the industry was competitive, locally many mills were situated in poor Piedmont areas with no other industry, and had monopsony power. The labor supply changed little in the mid-60s, Minchin shows, yet mills began hiring blacks for the first time. An analysis in terms of market efficiency can explain neither the initial exclusion nor the eventual hiring.

Minchin also scrutinizes mill management's quasi-economic defenses of its hiring practices. One defense was the claim that blacks were unqualified for textile jobs. Discrimination is inefficient, of course, only if the two groups are otherwise equally productive. In fact, industry records show that the first black workers hired turned out to be more productive, and even slightly more highly educated, than whites in comparable jobs. (After the initial breakthrough in 1965, however, black male workers remained in unskilled production and rarely entered the skilled trades or management; Minchin shows that on-the-job training was overwhelmingly the most important qualification for these jobs, and was systematically denied black workers.) Mill owners further argued that white workers would not tolerate working with blacks. Minchin shows that in fact whites almost immediately accepted the new employees, especially when they were told the government had obliged the mill to hire them.

Hiring the black worker, then, did more than rectify an injustice. It would seem also to have been sound business practice, since it tapped an unused supply of productive workers whom white workers eventually came to accept. But in an epilogue Minchin notes that, in fact, the Southern textile industry contracted sharply in the 1980s. At least half a million jobs were lost as textile manufacturing moved overseas. Of course the decline in American manufacturing overall eliminates the possibility that the decline in Southern textiles had anything to do with its hiring practices. But Minchin does not confront this fact directly; he notes that the hiring of blacks coincided with the beginning of the industry's decline, but provides no assessment of the overall effect of the hiring. This weakens the book as evidence against its presumed interlocutors, scholars such as Charles Murray, Richard Epstein, and the Thernstroms, among others, for whom legislation like the Civil Rights Act unnecessarily interferes in markets.

Minchin's book adds to the evidence that market forces narrowly defined do not explain the exclusion of blacks from Southern textiles before 1965 nor their inclusion thereafter. Economists such as James Heckman and Brook Payner had already come to the same conclusion, by comparing hiring in textiles to that in other southern industries while systematically eliminating explanations other than the Civil Rights Act for the hiring. Minchin's contribution is to amass evidence that all parties involved at the time also held federal legislation directly responsible for the hiring–and praised or blamed it accordingly. This book will be one more obstacle, and a significant one, for opponents of anti-discrimination laws. But it stops short of dealing with counterarguments that would point to the overall declining position of textiles after the 1960s. It allows critics to dismiss the entry of blacks into textiles as a unique occurrence, and to continue their speculations about the overall effect of anti-discrimination law and affirmative action in the American economy.

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