

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jacob Ernest Cooke, ed. *Labor Systems and Racial Interaction*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993. 2397 pp. \$320 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-19269-7.

Reviewed by John D. Saillant (Western Michigan University)

Published on H-OIEAHC (February, 1994)

The first point to make about the twenty-one essays in these two parts of this new encyclopedia is that their arrangement makes strong historical and pedagogical sense. They begin with the varieties of labor in the European settlements—a beginning announced by Lucy Simler's first sentence in "Hired Labor": "The need to secure a permanent labor force was a critical problem in colonial North America from the outset" (p. 3). The essays then proceed through "The Slave Trade," the varieties of slavery, interracial contact and interracial societies, "Free Blacks," "African-American Culture," and "Slave Resistance." This arrangement makes sense in a reference book for students since it connects the enslavement of Africans to the whites' imperative to marshal labor to work their new lands. My experience in the classroom tells me that students need that connection made clear. In two surveys of early American history and one seminar on race and religion in early America, I found that students place a high premium on ideas about African-American cultural expressions, but not much on understanding a system of the forced extraction of labor.

The second point to make about these essays is that they press home the point that historians' interpretations change with time. This not only makes the essays seem fresh, but also, it seems to me, invites students to imagine themselves as historians. Lucy Simler writes, "Appreciation of the role of wage labor in the British colonies in the North increased greatly in the 1980s.... Work on the economic and social development of New England and the Middle Atlantic region [by W. B. Rothenberg and T. M. Doerflinger] refutes assertions minimizing the labor demands of landholders in the rural North" (p. 4). William D. Pierson writes, "For generations the historical profession's obsession with political power at the expense of cultural history inhibited our understanding of African culture and its importance.... Scholars interested in the African-American heritage have had to reconstruct a context for their work by backtracking across the Atlantic to the cultural traditions of literally hundreds of

African societies" (p. 195). Without becoming historiographic exercises, the essays generally include such statements—all to the effect that historians' understanding evolves and, it seems to me, that students are invited to participate in the evolution, i.e. to imagine being historians. This truth about historians and this openness of invitation compare favorably with other encyclopedias, which seem to present an article as a *fait accompli* with little sense of evolution of thought behind it. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* replaces articles, for instance, more or less behind the scenes (the yearly supplement offers some of the new pieces to holders of older editions) without acknowledging any sense of change or progress in the replacement.

Since this is a reference book, the question naturally arises whether it is useful for students. I would answer with an unqualified Yes, adding that for these sections I find it superior to a popular textbook I used the first time I taught.

First, the essays situate slavery in its proper context as something known in the Mediterranean world in the Middle Ages, known in the sub-Saharan African trade beginning in the 1440s, and known in the European American settlements as early as 1502. Thus, as Robert McColley notes, it is a "mystifying tale" (p. 67) to find the origins of North American slavery in the 1619 purchase of some blacks by Virginians. There may have been no slaves in Virginia before that purchase, but slavery itself was hardly peculiar. High school and college students should learn this lesson, since they sometimes, or often, come to class certain that slavery was an invention of the American South. As McColley writes, "The typical images we have of American slavery were drawn chiefly in the years just before the Civil War" (p. 78). When these images are held too tightly, they impede learning about early America.

Second, the essays on slavery, interracial societies, and "Free Blacks" do a fine job of revealing the variety of race relations in the past. Holding too limited an idea

of slavery leads to the belief that there is only one story in race relations. This belief does an injustice to history, while the essays here reveal the variety and intricacy of interracial relations, again with an inviting sense that there is more to be learned. Ira Berlin's "Free Blacks" does a magnificent job of examining the variety of the free-black experience within the change from the relative indeterminateness of the earliest settlements to "the deepening commitment to slavery [that] operated mercilessly to fulfill the slaveholders' presumption that black people were (or should be) slaves" (p. 191).

For an example of the usefulness of this encyclopedia: In teaching I use Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, since it contains much information about early Virginia history, it shows the contrast in Virginia between relatively open and relatively closed patterns of interracial interaction, and it leads students to think about causation in history. On the one hand, Morgan's monograph makes for excellent student reading. Several students told me it was a revelation for them, one even telling me it was the first bit of writing that had ever made her think that "things could have been different in American history"! On the other hand, this encyclopedia (without following Morgan in particular and of course without his elaborate detail) gives an overview of North America that can help students come to class with a background against which lectures and more detailed readings make more sense. Many of us remember certain books that were revelations, but when good students find Morgan revelatory just because he writes about causation rooted in social and economic circumstances and because he imparts a sense of contingency in history, then we know we have a big job ahead of us when we teach about race and slavery.

Third, here students have the opportunity to read William D. Piersen's "African-American Culture" together with Peter H. Wood's "Slave Resistance." The conjunction of Piersen and Wood makes clear that the development of an indigenous African-American culture was a response to the sum of the circumstances of individual and social life, including the desire to be free and the unwillingness of some slaves to suffer the slave system without violent resistance. No one should confuse "African-American kinesics" (Piersen, p. 202) with arson, sabotage, and runaways, much less with insurrection (Wood, pp. 213-19), but no one should deny the connections among these phenomena either. Again in terms of teaching, I think I would revise my syllabi to include these relatively brief articles as background material. I use the writings of Aptheker, Thomas J. Davis, and Sylvia R. Frey in my courses, but I am not always sure that students have a context in which to place Aptheker or have a basic understanding that allows them to absorb the details of Frey's *Water from the Rock*.

In sum, I believe that the sections reviewed here would be useful reading in high school and college courses. The bibliographies would also be useful for undergraduates as well as graduate students preparing their reading lists.

One final note is that this encyclopedia is a superb exercise in "multicultural" writing. (See the table of contents for the structure.) This encyclopedia is supposed to be multicultural in that it takes a number of standard issues in American studies and divides them into various components defined by race, ethnicity, or national origin. The result here is attention to the variety of circumstances, out of which, at least this historian believes, will arise the truth.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** John D. Saillant. Review of Cooke, Jacob Ernest, ed., *Labor Systems and Racial Interaction*. H-OIEAHC, H-Net Reviews. February, 1994.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5>

Copyright © 1994 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).