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Race, Class and Gender from the Particular to the General

'Race, Class and Gender from the Particular to the General'

This diverse collection of essays stems from a 1997 conference on labor and difference held at Oxford's St. Antony's College. The essays explore issues of race and class and the construction of working class identity in The United States, Africa, and Britain.

A close reading of many of these essays will reward readers, especially those who choose to focus on their own areas of expertise. Many of the chapters speak to one another, albeit not directly, and for historians of labor and the working class this collection deserves a reading. Of course, edited conference collections often are uneven in quality, with some essays stronger than others, some fitting the prevailing themes better than others, and occasionally with the whole not cohering as well as the editors envisioned, especially when seeking to cover a wide range of geographic space and historical time. In this book, the contributions are not comparative essays for the most part, hence most readers will tend to view the contents from within their own particular historiographical limitations. Furthermore, at nearly $70 this book will be out of range for most students, an irony given the inquiry into working class identity that the essays contained herein undertake.

David Montgomery's revised conference keynote address is a strong way to begin the book. He explores far-ranging themes over time and geography, with the purpose of "exploring the relationship between the different trajectories of working-class movements in those three corners of the Atlantic World during the twentieth century and the changing patterns of imperial domination and rule, with the hope of formulating meaningful questions about the relationship of empire, race and class in modern life." (p. 1) He is currently working on a history of the Left in the twentieth-century United States, a broad topic, and in his essay provides a similarly broad (and occasionally breezy) treatment of his themes, tying them in to colonialism and imperialism, wage labor both free and unfree, and the transition from imperialism (or neoimperialism) to internationalism. The question of how societies have reconciled this transition is one of the linking themes connecting all the essays in this book, and Montgomery provides a solid introduction to this issue. He gives a generally good synthesis of these themes, together with a somewhat scattered survey of the historiography. He succinctly elucidates the overarching importance of the nation-state and how workers reacted within the constraints and opportunity that the nation-building process posed, and how globalism and internationalism have changed historians' focus on the national synthesis. He concludes that at century's end the connected "dialogue of race and class has not been resolved" but instead has given way to "new forms of domination and conflict." (p. 25)

Montgomery's general overview gives way to more particular essays. The next two are concerned primarily with diverse topics related to the experience in the United States. A. Yvette Huginnie explores race and labor in Arizona from 1840 to 1905, while Venus Green discusses gender and whiteness in the Bell telephone system from 1900 to 1970.

Huginnie effectively reveals how the concept of race in nineteenth century Arizona involved not the standard black-white division, but rather focused more on the question of white relations with Mexican immigrants who often went, or were brought to, Arizona as a cheap labor force. Often race and regionalism are tied together in studies of the United States South. This essay reveals that regionalism can bring to light other elements of the American racial divide. Venus Green uses the linkages between the expectations of gender and whiteness to explore the idea of the "Lady telephone operator" in the Bell telephone system in the first seven decades of the twentieth century. She argues that while white women were expected to adhere to certain gender stereotypes, they

also benefited from the racial double standard that prevailed, and thus were both victims and perpetrators of sexism and racism.

Colin J. Davis engages in one of the few explicitly comparative endeavors in the collection. He explores notions of Irish identity among dockworkers in London and New York City in the years after the Second World War. His fundamental argument is that the Irish 'transplants' in New York maintained a stronger sense of Irish nationalism than did their London cohort. Davis argues that the reason for this was that prevailing racial and ethnic sentiments in the United States forced Irish workers to hold on strongly to an ethnic identity that in turn allowed them to retain relatively lucrative jobs. In London, however, the Irish were more successfully able to integrate into a less racially stratified working class. The comparative dimension of this chapter is one that this reviewer wishes had occurred more frequently throughout the book. Nevertheless, the editors do make use of comparative, as well as transitional, essays. Thus whilst the first group of essays focus on American questions, Davis' comparison of the United States and Britain leads naturally into the next group, consisting of two chapters on British themes. This provides a coherent structure and encourages the reader to tackle the book from beginning to end rather than jumping back and forth as is often the case with edited collections.

The two essays on race and ethnicity in Great Britain both provide a glimpse of racial and ethnic tensions from the vantage point of organized labor. Kenneth Lunn embraces the question of immigrants in the labor pool, while Satnam Virdee explores racism within the British Trade Union Movement. Lunn identifies gaps in the current historiography of labor movement attitudes toward race and expresses the need for historians to fill those gaps. This is an important essay, but its focus on historiography sometimes loses track of history, and thus does not serve a broader reading audience as well as do other essays more effective at crossing subgenres of historical study. Virdee's essay is an ambitious attempt to reexamine what many radical black critiques have painted as the unreconstructed racialism of British labor movements. Virdee instead reveals how by the 1970s, many in the labor movement became aware that only by forming a broad coalition based on the interests of the working classes, and particularly unionized workers, could issues of class trump those of race. This had not been the case in the 1950s and 1960s. The first part of Virdee's article is perhaps unduly theoretical, but the second part marks an important effort at revisionism, in which he moves the debate on this subject to what will hopefuly be a more fertile field for discussion.

The next essay links labor experiences in Britain and Africa. Diane Frost explores labor conflict in Britain and West Africa, and specifically in the port cities of Liverpool and Freetown. The first part of her essay is a fascinating exploration of stevedore work in Sierra Leone, an occupation dominated by the Kru, an ethnic group with roots in Liberia but which maintained a dominating presence in the coastal city of Freetown as a consequence of the Kru talent for and history of seafaring. Frost explores ethnic conflict within an African society, coming to the conclusion that the British, who controlled the ships and the shipping industry, were content to exploit ethnic differences both perceived and real. This characteristic of indirect colonial rule is a familiar one to students of Africa and colonialism generally, and Frost deftly shows how it applied in West Africa throughout the colonial era. She also briefly discusses labor in Liverpool. The subtle differences in ethnicity evident in Sierra Leone (between the Kru and other groups, such as the Mende and Temne) are contrasted to a more apparently clear-cut binary of black versus white in Liverpool where white workers used race as a justification to exclude black competition. White labor used race to maintain their privileged status, but at the same time also had ongoing conflict with their white employers. The white laborers of Liverpool's shipyards were victims of class conflict while simultaneously perpetrating racial division. One wishes that Frost might have expanded this fascinating discussion, one of the most enriching in the volume.

Again, a comparative essay leads to a seamless transition. Following Frost, there are two essays on Africa that differ dramatically in geographical and thematic focus. Carolyn Brown examines gender, race and labor struggle in the Nigerian coal industry from 1937 to 1949. Gary Minkley looks at tensions on the docks of East London in South Africa's eastern Cape.

Brown's rich essay explores the work conditions and labor struggles in the coal industry in Enugu in Southeastern Nigeria. She is especially effective at revealing the tensions between the white British mine managers and the (African nationalist) black colliers who comprised the majority of the mine work force. She also shows how indirect rule perpetuated many of the inequities that lasted after the Second World War. Brown's main focus is on race and the workplace struggle but she also explores the gendered nature of the mining community. However, while she periodically touches upon issues of masculinity, this component is not developed as well as it perhaps could be.

Gary Minkley examines labor tensions on East London's waterfront from approximately 1930 to 1963. Unlike in most other case studies reported in this collection, the intensification of apartheid policies meant that with the passage of time South African labor gained less, not more, freedom to organize. Minkley reveals the changing nature of dock work in East London and shows how the state managed to force a more regimented labor system onto workers. He could have been more explicit about the effects of the implementation of apartheid on the labor situation, but his essay does reveal the way in which race trumped class in South African labor relations. He also engages in some suggestive comparisons with the experiences of workers in the port cities of Mombasa, Lourenco Marques, and Durban. An expansion of this discussion would be more than welcome.

The book concludes with another synthetic essay by a preeminent historian. Just as David Montgomery began the book with an essay ambitious in scope and range, Frederick Cooper of the University of Michigan closes the book by summarizing some of the main themes emanating from the 46 conference papers and placing them into a wider context. Cooper makes linkages between the themes and uses them as a springboard to a wide-ranging discussion of race, gender, class and other forms of identity, deftly covering issues of globalism, identity politics, construction of identities. He makes a strong case for particularity while at the same time emphasizing the importance of drawing larger conclusions from microhistorical study. He draws together important strains not only from the conference, but from the current literatures on labor history, race, class, gender and politics ; in short a whole range of themes, ideas, and theories. Even if, at times, his theoretical musings seem incomplete they are nevertheless thought-provoking. This is an essay intended to pull together connected and disparate strands from a particular conference yet it also stands on its own and could be especially effective in a graduate seminar where students could engage with Cooper's arguments. It provides a substantial and important conclusion to a worthwhile collection.

A few additional points: Given that this book is clearly intended for a scholarly audience, why did the editors (or publishers) choose to go with chapter endnotes rather than footnotes, which would have made cross-referencing easier? On a more positive note, the inclusion of a reasonably comprehensive index is applauded by this reviewer. Often essay collections lack an index, but in this book, where there is much possibility for comparison, its inclusion is not merely handy, it is essential.

On the whole, this is a solid collection of essays that raise serious questions about race, class, gender, labor politics, difference, nationalism, globalism, colonialism, and comparative history. Readers may gravitate more to some essays than to others, but there is enough material here for many historians to learn a great deal.

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