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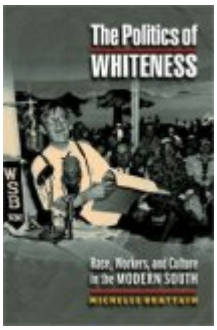

Michelle Brattain. *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. x + 301 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-00731-1.

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The Wages of Whiteness Studies

A few years ago, this excellent piece of southern labor history might have been titled something else, perhaps *The Mind of the Laboring South: Textile Workers in Rome, Georgia, 1900-1972*, or maybe *The Roots of the Southern Republicanism: Family, Community, and Unions in the Textile Industry in Twentieth-Century Rome, Georgia*. With publishers keen to advertise their wares to the broadest market possible, the fact that this book is an intensive study of textile workers, unions, politics, and race specifically in Rome, Georgia and its environs during the better part of the twentieth century is not clear just from the title. One might even call this work a microhistory, as it focuses its lens on one set of textile mills in a corner of northwest Georgia but in the process explores virtually every important theme of twentieth-century southern history: race, class, the culture of segregation, the one-party state, the rise of southern Republicanism, urbanization, the New Deal and the Dixiecrat revolt, massive resistance in the 1950s, the civil rights movement, and white response to the collapse of the segregated order. The title, if misleadingly general, does convey the fact that the work picks up the theme of whiteness to structure much of the argument. But "whiteness" as a concept can come in many colors, and can be ambiguous in its implications. I will return to that point at the end of this review.

The Politics of Whiteness will take its place alongside the best studies on labor and race in the twentieth-century South, such as Jacquelyn Hall et al's *Like a Family*, Henry McKiven's *Iron and Steel*, Bryant Simon's *The Fabric of Defeat*, and others. With thorough (indeed exhaustive) research, a compelling prose style that pulls the reader along, a strong and important argument, and an innovative take on material that is sometimes familiar and other times quite new even to specialists, Brattain has produced a work of major importance, one that should command the attention of students in southern history, labor history, and twentieth-century political history.

(Before summarizing the book's contents, I can't resist recommending a laugh-out-loud story Brattain relates along the way: the Mussolini government's gift of a statue of a mythical figure, as a

gift from Rome [Italy] to Rome [Georgia], and the subsequent public debate about what to do with the embarrassing public figurine during World War Two, a farcical tale well worth the price of admission).

In an opening vignette, Brattain narrates the story of a campaign event for Eugene Talmadge in 1934, featuring a stemwinding stump speech attacking a provision of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) of the New Deal that mandated a wage for black highway workers exceeding that made by many white workers in the textile mills. Those familiar with southern history will immediately recognize 1934 as the year that "flying squadrons" of union organizers inspired a major series of strikes throughout mill country, the subject of a memorable documentary film and several scholarly studies. Rome's textile workers, however, were far from sure which side they were on. Many ignored or actively opposed the strike (even as thousands of workers did join the uprising).

This was the first of several disappointments unions would face in cajoling workers who were bombarded constantly with red-baiting and race-baiting anti-union literature and speeches from company representatives, town boosters, newspaper editors, and politicians. Time and again, many (although not all) Romans sided with the textile companies or simply stayed out of the fray. The companies, for their part, secured the workers' loyalty with just enough welfare capitalism to make up for the fact that the companies also routinely engaged in speed-ups, stretch-outs, and petty harassment. Most importantly, the companies understood that textile work was ***white***; in northwest Georgia, the wages of whiteness consisted mostly of access to low-wage textile work defined and delimited by the segmented labor market of the segregated South. In the 1934 strike, the paternalism of the mill owners "delivered at least small concessions in the form of welfare capitalism and the recognition of whiteness." Governor Talmadge, disingenuously posing as a working man's supporter and more ingenuously advertising himself as the defender of a white man's Georgia, at least rhetorically recognized the dignity of mill work. Meanwhile, the United Textile Workers union in effect delivered nothing but suffering for no tangible gain (p. 85). The opposition of many southern workers to union thus seemed justified.

Whiteness was fundamental to the creation of the working-class in the South. "Surrounded by seas of rural poverty," Brattain explains, "textile mills ... made a significant material contribution to segregation by creating and sustaining disparities in black and white wealth." White workers, she argues throughout the work, did not "share identical interests with black workers," and no sprinkling of Populist or left-wing rhetoric would change that. The status of being white "largely determined the ability to become part of the industrial working class" (p. 5). It was not that race trumped class interests, but that race defined the class interests of working white Romans. Race identity formed their class identity.

And achieving working-class status was hardly a decline in status. Textile workers in fact shared a considerably higher standard of living (including access to electricity, health care, and other benefits of organized town life) than the rural poverty from which many of them hailed. In short, the "creation of jobs, mill village homes, and industrial wage-earning status" exclusively for white workers helped to pair "racial identity with the new waged occupations" (p. 48). Even the liberalizing influence of World War Two, important as it was in some respects, failed to shake the race and sex-typing of jobs. Everyone knew that "textile worker" meant white, and that certain jobs in the mill were typed "male." Everyone knew that "maid" meant black female, "janitor" black male. No edict from the Fair Employment Practices Commission was going to change that, even more so because government labor regula-

tors who oversaw the textile industry were largely in the pocket of the mill owners.

National union organizers in effect let southern locals get away with segregation, recognizing the necessity of such a policy if any union organization was going to take place. The Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) led a major drive, with some successes, to organize southern workers after World War Two. Although the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act seriously impaired union organizing efforts, the gradual demise of welfare capitalism and increasing estrangement of mill workers from national firms that bought out struggling smaller mill companies compelled many workers for the first time to accept unions as legitimate players. The return of World War Two veterans helped as well; once Romans had seen Paris, or Guadalcanal, they could no longer be subject to the same commands and pats on the head that formerly were their lot.

The wages of this whiteness had to be paid in the 1950s and 1960s, however. As national unions turned to coalitions with civil rights groups, southern union locals grew increasingly defensive and hostile. Many supported massive resistance, and in the 1960s began to flock to Goldwater and the Republican party in response to the civil rights and voting rights acts (what Brattain calls the "Republicanization of Rome"). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, textile mills began to shut down and in some cases move out of the country, responding to the same economic pressures that had brought them to the South earlier in the century. As the formal props of segregation were removed, whiteness no longer became essential to the kinds of working-class jobs that were now vanishing from the region.

Brattain skillfully narrates this complex story, with a wealth of detail and careful research that cannot be captured fully in this review. The story is a sobering one, and the workers who were "like a family" in earlier works now appear as the self-interested defenders of a racialized industrial order. One black worker quoted by Brattain admiringly commented that one textile union was indeed "like a family," that this closeness helped them create and maintain the union--but this was a family, of course, that forbade miscegenation. Not unlike the slaves in Genovese's ***Roll, Jordan, Roll***, moreover, Brattain's workers manage to turn promises of paternalism into workers' "rights," and then defend those rights through union organizing campaigns. The segregation of the southern textile labor market, in fact, was a boon to TWUA organizers, who used defenses of white privilege as tools to sign members up.

Brattain contrasts her study with W. J. Cash's memorable depiction (and caricaturing) of the "lint-heads" in ***Mind of the South***. The defense of the boundaries of whiteness in industrial work was rational, indeed essential, to the formation of working-class identity. Towards the end of the work, however, Brattain argues that "the pairing of factory wages with whiteness and paternalism often disguised the real poverty of the South's whole economic system by creating an illusion of common white interests served by boosterism" (p. 278). The South was impoverished, of course, but it is the thrust of this work to suggest that "white interests" were not an "illusion." They were real. This is an ambiguity that appears at places through the work.

Thus, two views of "whiteness" are sometimes at odds in this work--and in current historical discourse generally. One sees race identification primarily as an illusory "psychological" wage (as DuBois argued decades ago) that papers over real class distinctions and intraracial oppression. Although disavowed in the introduction, that argument nevertheless appears between the lines of Brattain's narrative. The second is the explicitly stated point that whiteness was crucial to the formation of a southern working class, and the defense of that whiteness, if regrettable, was nevertheless an understandable and rational move on the part of workers who benefited from their

race-protected jobs. We all know that whiteness, like all racial identity, is constructed. The question remains--is it *real*?

Whiteness as a concept arose in working-class history as a way to understand immigrant workers, especially in the nineteenth-century, who learned to disparage the African Americans who competed with them for jobs. "Whiteness" was at issue precisely because it was not clear whether the immigrants (even the Irish) were "white" or not, in the context of multi-ethnic southern cities. A final irony in the application of the whiteness concept to southern working-class history is that southern boosters never tired of advertising their "99.99 percent pure Anglo-Saxon stock" to potential employers.

Whiteness as a concept, then, has now moved South, historiographically speaking. Does it mean the same thing below the Mason-Dixon, where urban multi-ethnicity usually gives way to more rural and small town biracial populations? Everyone knew that "Anglo-Saxon" mountaineers and upcountry folk were white; no scholar had to explain to them who was white and who was black, in part because it was ritually re-enacted every day, almost every moment, of southerners' lives. When race is constantly performed in this way--in the kinds of ways memorably detailed by Eric Lott's ***Love and Theft*** or Grace Elizabeth Hale's ***Making Whiteness***--to what degree does the act become a reality that is more "real" than class?

To conclude with the title again: one might also ask to what degree the story of textile workers in Rome, Georgia, may be representative of "race, workers, and culture in the modern South." Not all working-class jobs were "raced" in the same way. White and black workers would not commonly work side-by-side, but they might have the same kinds of jobs in particular industries (mining coal, felling trees, collecting turpentine, picking cotton, driving tractors, building cities, and others). Whiteness per se was not essential to all southern working-class identity, in the way it most certainly was for the textile industry in particular. Certainly, a focus on the textile industry--the most important kind of industrial employment in the South--is vital. But the more we learn about this industry, the more it appears that very localized conditions affected and even determined working-class lives and the chances for the creation of working-class institutions such as unions. Even in the specific locale of Rome, plant management and working-class responses differed markedly. Unions successfully recruited workers in some Floyd county plants. In others, workers overwhelmingly voted against unionizing, and closed down the plant on Labor Day (thereby getting that day off for the first time in their history) to celebrate the joys of life under the regime of welfare capitalism and out of the clutches of the Communists in the CIO.

Southern historians will be in Brattain's debt for producing a powerful and compelling work that addresses many important questions in twentieth-century southern history.

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