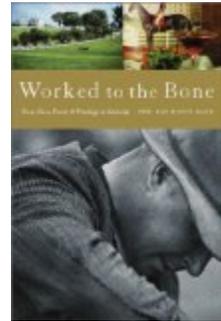


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pem Davidson Buck. *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, & Privilege in Kentucky.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001. Viii + 279 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58367-047-7.

Reviewed by Penny Messinger (St. Bonaventure University)
Published on H-Appalachia (August, 2002)



Whiteness Study Plumbs Kentucky

Whiteness Study Plumbs Kentucky

Pem Davidson Buck's book, *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, & Privilege in Kentucky*, is an interesting contribution to the field of "whiteness studies." Buck, an anthropologist, argues that the economic and social development of central Kentucky trapped inhabitants within a prison constructed by expansive capitalism and upheld by interaction of the forces of race, class, and gender. Seeking to find the historical roots of the patterns she sees in the present, Buck tells the story of Kentucky's development by focusing upon two counties in central Kentucky; the county in which she lives (which she disguises by calling "South County") and the county in which she works (labeled as "North County"). Like other scholars who have taken on the task of analyzing "whiteness," Buck sees race as an artificial category constructed by society. She seeks to deconstruct whiteness and to explain the role of race in perpetuating oppressive economic, political, and social systems. In America, most people with power are white, but not all white people are powerful. *Worked to the Bone* seeks to explain why people without substantial power participate in their own oppression, willingly upholding the systems that imprison them.

Buck's title, *Worked to the Bone*, derives from Hoyt Axton and Renee Armand's 1974 song, "Boney Fingers." When she moved to Kentucky as part of the "back to the land" movement of the 1970s, Buck writes, she heard the song everywhere. The lyrics captured the sense of frustration she shared with her neighbors, who worked

hard but were paid little: "Work your fingers to the bone - whadda ya get? Boney fingers, boney fingers." [1] Writing about the life she lived in the mid-1970s, Buck says, "I thought I was desperate. I thought I understood about bony fingers. I have since discovered that the understanding I had gained was the merest glimmer. My desperation grew out of choices we had made when we decided not to pursue careers, but to buy land and try to live off of it instead, yet we still carried with us our background of white middle-class privilege." (p.1) The song's refrain haunted her as she as she worked with her husband on a farm and after they started a plumbing business (warning: plumbing metaphors abound in Buck's account). Finally, an epiphany brought her to formulate a theory that explained the economic forces at work around her, a theory she labels as "the view from under the sink." Here, the typical pyramid of class relations has a twist: profits flow up from workers at the base of the pyramid to economic elites at the top. Buck describes this flow as "trickle up" economics, a system through which economic elites at the national and international levels systematically drain profits from the workers they employ. This control has been augmented by their domination of all levels of government, bringing spoils in the form of tax breaks, governmental subsidies, and other forms of "welfare" designed for the benefit of the wealthy.

In Buck's account, this "drainage system" is not static, but rather an evolving and dynamic force. Beginning with the settlement of the Virginia colonies in the 17th century, Buck describes an adaptive system of capital extraction through which the elites who benefited the most

persuaded many of those who were being “drained” that they shared the same interests as the elites. For example, during the 1670s, Bacon’s Rebellion persuaded plantation owners of the need to buy off poor whites by emphasizing the benefits of whiteness, including land ownership and expanded white suffrage, and by creating a system of slavery that was permanent, hereditary, and defined by race. This is hardly a new story, as historians familiar with the evolution of racial slavery and of Southern history will quickly recognize. As explained by historian Edmund S. Morgan almost 30 years ago, the rights of whites were built upon the wrongs done to people of African descent. [2]

Buck shows how Virginia’s systems of capitalism and race relations were transferred to Kentucky, where they evolved in tandem during the following centuries. Whites who were not elites willingly upheld the system that oppressed them, accepting a “psychological wage” of white supremacy as part of their pay.[3] When presented with “forks in the road,” moments in history that offered oppressed people opportunities to unite over the divisions of race and gender, they proved unable to overcome their differences long enough to make permanent improvements in their status or to prevent elites from re-instituting control. These historical moments did force the system to change, however, as evidenced during the post-World War II years when unionized workers forced employers to offer some concessions, including higher wages. Even then, Buck explains, skilled workers (most of whom were white) were deceived into accepting a “sugar-coated pill.” A sweet coating, the long-sought-after family wage, covered the bitterness inside, the loss of “formerly granted white privileges such as a reasonable hope of personal, political, and economic autonomy” (p 165). As the capitalist system has become more intrusive, Buck explains, more people are being worked to the bone-our precarious economic situation disguised by the prevalence of consumer items and middle-class trappings (often purchased on credit). In reality, Buck argues, most of her Kentucky neighbors, like most Americans, and indeed most people throughout the world, have little autonomy, independence, or economic security.

This analysis of the forces of capitalism is a major strength of the book, and here, Buck taps into a powerful, yet understudied phenomenon. The shift of power from local and regional elites, to the national and international levels, has brought a loss of power to communities throughout the world. Working people often fail to see their true interests, but they are not alone in this blindness. In the last half century, the increased penetra-

tion of national and international capital into local and regional markets of the United States has intensified the loss of power and security by the middle-class managers, small business owners, and local and regional elites who considered themselves full beneficiaries of the American Dream.

Buck’s book fits within the growing literature on whiteness and shares common elements with other works in the field. As described in Peter Kolchin’s recent essay, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” scholars in the field often focus on the social construction of whiteness, share a subjective involvement with their topics, often lack historical and historiographical context, and heavily emphasize “prescriptive policy goals.”[4] Buck admits her subjectivity; her presence permeates the account through reflections that pop up in chapter after chapter. She readily reveals her agenda, both in the confessional story of her realization of “trickle up” economics (discussed above) and in discussing the purpose of the book: “Quite simply, I don’t like the future that may be coming, and I hope this book will help to circumvent it” (p. 4). She continues, “I need to provide an alternative history, one which emphasizes what I believe to be the *real* history of bony fingers, the policies that have created them, and resistance to them. It will be a history emphasizing the strategies used by the elite to fool people into agreeing to policies that hurt themselves and many other people. But my real interest is the present, not the past, so I will focus on those moments in the past that were critical in shaping lives in the present” (p. 6).

Buck’s “alternative history,” however, is not always new. More than a generation ago, historians such as Edmund S. Morgan (mentioned above) and C. Vann Woodward wrote powerfully of the role of race in Southern life. Like Buck, both of these scholars were seeking not only to describe the past, but also to change the future. When does the “alternative” history of a generation ago become the reigning paradigm of today? When Buck discusses “dominant” history and anthropology, what she really means is a popular understanding of these topics, as reflected in public memory and myth. Works of deconstruction are often at their best when looking at language and social structures; they sometimes lose the real people in the process. Fortunately, this is not a problem with this account, and interviews provide real-life commentary from the people Buck studies. Sometimes, the process of deconstructing whiteness leads Buck to some excellent insights, as when she points out the celebration of slavery in Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home,”