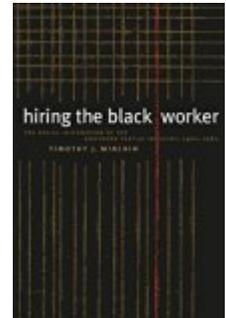




Timothy Minchin. *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xii + 342 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2470-2.



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"Textile mills built the New South." This line opens the award-winning study of southern laborers, *Like a Family*. The mills, these authors understood, did more than create a new physical world; they also built a new social world. New South women and men tied their fortunes and dreams to the whirring and churning of the spindles and looms. Hundreds of towns and cities across the region after 1890 organized themselves around three-story redbrick mills. As they did, factories became the economic centers of the lives of mill owners and millhands, lawyers and physicians, salesmen and bookkeepers.

At the same time, the textile mills helped to shape, and maybe even fashion, the racial ordering of the New South. As a more industrial South emerged after Reconstruction, Jim Crow took over. Not only was access to the ballot restricted along racial lines, but so too was employment. For the most part, mill owners hired only whites to work inside the mills. On the rare occasion that textile managers did try to hire black laborers to run the machines, whites resisted, often by striking in protest. Some African-American men did

receive paychecks from the mills, but typically, they worked outside in the yards cleaning up and lifting heavy bales of cotton; if they got a position inside the plant it was almost always as a janitor or sweeper. Black women rarely worked for the mills, although a few got jobs in the villages cooking and cleaning for white textile laborers and other company officials. The dividends of the region's post-Civil War industrial expansion, therefore, went to whites because they were white and because whites told each other African Americans were unable to run the machines. Whiteness determined opportunity in the New South made by the textile mills--that was a given for nearly seventy years.

Timothy Minchin's extremely valuable new book, *Hiring the Black Worker*, chronicles perhaps the most decisive shift in the southern cotton mill world since the turn of the century. Between 1960 and 1980, he explains, mill owners finally started to hire significant numbers of African Americans. By any measure, the jump in black employment was quite extraordinary. Whereas in 1960 African-Americans made up a mere 3.3 per-

cent of the southern textile labor force, two decades later they totaled a quarter of all millhands. Most students of the New South are well aware of this dramatic shift. But no one, that is until Minchin, has systematically examined this striking change in this most crucial of southern industries. This alone makes Minchin's book an significant contribution to southern studies.

The only other detailed examination of the "hiring of the black worker"--Richard Rowan's work--attributed the critical change in employment patterns to a postwar regional labor shortage. Rowan and others have argued that mill managers turned to African American laborers as the southern economy, fueled by defense spending, highway construction, changes in labor law, and air conditioning, expanded after World War II. Expansion meant jobs, lots of them, and generally whites, who had benefited for decades from racial privileges, better schools and better social services, got the best of these new positions. With whites moving into the higher-paying sectors of the growing economy, economically rational--that is, profit-driven--mill owners, the story goes, abandoned the economics of white supremacy and started in the 1960s to hire African-American women and men to weave and spin. Again, the labor shortage was the determining factor.

Minchin, however, points to a different, less neo-classical economic engine of change. Using a remarkable number of interviews, most he himself contacted, and a slew of until now largely unexamined legal cases, Minchin boldly, and repeatedly, asserts that previous scholars have overemphasized the labor shortage as spur to black employment. He argues instead that the federal government, African-American laborers, and civil rights activists were the prime movers behind the sharp shift in textile employment. "The Government Brought the Real Change," he titles one of book's early chapters (p. 43). Encouraged by the heroism of Birmingham and Selma protesters and even more importantly by the passage of the land-

mark Civil Rights Act of 1964, African-Americans wrote countless, detailed letters to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) documenting discrimination in the mills. These anguished notes led to lawsuit after lawsuit against all the nation's major textile firms: Cone Mills, Burlington Industries, and Cannon Mills, among others. The legal action worked. Whether they were forced to do so by the courts or acted to avoid a lawsuit, mill managers from Alabama to Virginia started to hire African-American workers. According to Minchin, then, it was the potent combination of government action and African-American agency, with the labor shortage operating somewhere in the background, that opened up the mills. With its "the government brought the change" thesis, Minchin's book stands out in these startlingly apolitical days. As more and more people give up on the system, shaking their heads in resignation, he shows how governmental action can foster history-making social gains--in this case integrating job opportunities.

Yet integration did not come smoothly or easily to the mills. Taking issue with Mary Frederickson, among others, who suggested that textile executives readily complied with federal civil rights initiatives because of their desperate need for labor, Minchin argues that most mill men tried to block civil rights gains. Many, he insists, deeply resented government intrusion into hiring decisions. Their intransigence made it easy for Jim Crow to still rule the mills in the 1960s. Companies integrated with deliberate speed, saying that African-Americans were "happy where they were" or were not "qualified" for mill work. Firms bluntly told black laborers and their supporters, "We don't hire niggers." When they eventually did take on black laborers, many mills stuck them in the dirtiest, hardest, lowest-paying positions. Bathrooms, lunchrooms, water fountains and entire sections of factories remained strictly segregated. Few if any African-American workers had African-American supervisors. Virtually none of these new black workers gained promotions. Re-

peatedly, companies passed over well-qualified African-Americans in favor of inexperienced whites. Unfortunately, unions, in Minchin's words, amounted to little more than a "mixed blessing." Few southern millhands, for starters, belonged to unions, and the unions that did exist in the region did not automatically favor integration. Some, as Minchin points out, defended white supremacy, using their power to keep blacks out of the factories.

Racial ideology did not just keep African-Americans out of the mills; it also played a central role in the choice of the first black workers. In the book's most riveting passages, Minchin tells the remarkable stories of those he calls the "textile pioneers." Local white leaders, often in cooperation with mill managers, carefully chose the initial African-American production workers. Typically they picked well-known, respected, seemingly conservative members of the black community to break the color barrier in the mills. Sometimes these men had worked in the mills for years in "colored jobs." During their tenures, many had learned to run the machines, regularly filling in for white millhands on break or absent. Most African-American women worked for a long, hard time in the homes of white supervisors or managers as "trusty" maids before getting a job in the mills (Black women, Minchin explains in a intriguing chapter devoted to their experiences, had a harder time finding work in the mills than did black men). Many of the first African-American production workers were noticeably light-skinned. A social worker in the region remembered that mill companies inundated her office with requests for "'light-skinned' Negroes" (p. 124). The pioneers themselves felt that they had to live up to the part of the "Super Negro." One mistake, they feared, and they would discredit the race and push the clock back to when African-Americans were barred from the mills.

Integration, if this is the right word for what Minchin has described here, certainly represent-

ed progress. For many African-Americans, it meant a steady and bigger paycheck. For women, in particular, higher pay meant freedom from the drudgery and humiliations of domestic service. And, as Minchin suggests, mill jobs seem to have halted the flow of African-Americans north in search of opportunity and a better life. But the hiring of black workers, as he makes clear, did not transform the southern textile belt into the long-hoped for promised land. Without explicitly saying so, Minchin has written a book about the New South, that is the second or third--depending on those counting--of the New Souths. In the old South, there was slavery. In the first New South, there was Jim Crow. In the post-Civil Rights New South, the signs over the water fountains came down and African-Americans returned to the polling station in the droves, but race still mattered. Sure, there were more opportunities for African-Americans in the 1960s than in the 1920s, but there remained even more opportunities for whites. Integration--integration of schools, hospitals, playgrounds, and factories--did not bring an end to racism or to segregation. If anything, federally aided suburbanization created a more "modern," and maybe even more intractable, form of segregation in the latest version of the New South taking shape in the 1960s. This is the painful story that lurks between the lines of Minchin's more uplifting account of government activism.

Quite rightly, Minchin has grounded his narrative in civil rights historiography. His words probably say it best. "Although a vast amount of historical literature on the civil rights movement has been written in the last twenty years," Minchin declares in the book's opening line, "very little attention has been focused on economic aspects of the civil rights upsurge, especially the impact that the movement had upon southern workers" (p. 10). Minchin's book certainly stands as an important corrective to the History Channel, protest-centered version of the Second Reconstruction. He deftly moves the struggle for jobs from the margins of the story to the center. By

shifting the focus, Minchin introduces us to a whole new cast of movement characters--the lawyers, ministers, and working men and women determined to give concrete meaning the legal gains of the era.

This emphasis on civil rights is crucial, but perhaps Minchin should not have been so quick to dismiss the economic side of the equation. Maybe the "labor shortage," which is not a thing, but the product of complex and ever-changing historical forces, warrants more attention. It is not that Minchin's governmental and civil rights perspectives are off the mark, but maybe the alternative explanation deserves further consideration. Perhaps he could tell us more about what kinds of jobs former white textile workers took after they left the mills and the mill villages. Did they leave for higher paying jobs? When did this happen? What would have happened if the southern economy had not been growing so rapidly in the 1960s? Would the mills still have been able--socially, politically, and economically--to absorb thousands of African American workers? Did the size and shape of the labor market change over time? Were labor markets the same across the textile South? Did African-Americans find it easier to enter the larger mills along the booming Sunbelt economic corridors of I-85 and I-75, or in the smaller out-of-the way mills? Did the location of the mill and local labor markets make a difference? Minchin says little, moreover, about the kinds of companies that integrated. Did all firms hire black workers at the same time? Was managerial culture a factor? Did a company's relationship with national or even international markets shape hiring decisions? Were these factors more or less important than civil rights networks? And, again, did these factors change over time?

Talking about the timing of change points to another dimension of Minchin's work. While *Hiring the Black Worker* is bound by dates--it begins roughly in 1960 and ends in 1980--it eschews the change-over-time narrative model used by so

many other labor historians. Minchin declares right up front that a significant change aided by government action took place, and then he spends the rest of the book looking at this change from the perspectives of white laborers, textile executives, African-American men and women, civil rights activists and trade unionists. Still, he might have said more about the shifts within his story. How, for example, did the experiences of black workers change over time? How did the government's role change? What about white workers and white managers? Did the integration of the mills fuel white racism? Can this hiring of the black worker be linked to the move of many millhands away from the national Democratic Party, first to the cause of George Wallace, and, later, to the side of conservative Republicans? Who can forget the image, featured in a Jesse Helms 1988 campaign commercial, of the bitter and angry white worker--perhaps a white millhand--crumpling a piece of paper that told him he lost his job because of an affirmative action statute? And didn't Helms win the "mill vote" in that election? Is this an awful epilogue to Minchin's story, or is it a different story altogether?

Good history books raise hard questions. That is exactly what Minchin's book has done. He raises important questions that should engage us all. Thinking about his story makes us confront the biggest, most vexing issues in American life--race and democracy, political change and economic opportunity. These are things we can never know too much about, or think about too much. And finally, we owe it to Minchin for reminding us that change--progressive change--is possible, even if it did not turn the Newest of the New Souths into everything we want it to be.

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