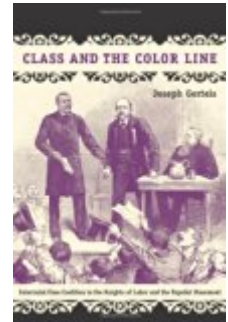


Joseph Gerteis. *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement.* Politics, History, and Culture Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. x + 274 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4224-3.



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The relationship between race and class poses one of the great dilemmas of American history. Movements of workers, farmers, and other working people have repeatedly stumbled on the politics of racial division. During the long decades of Indian removal, Jim Crow segregation, and Chinese exclusion, white racial solidarity often trumped efforts at solidarity across racial lines. Exceptions to this pattern, however, would suggest historical possibilities of interracial class cooperation. The scholarly search for breaches in the walls of white racial solidarity during the Gilded Age has focused on the possibilities presented by the Knights of Labor, a national labor movement with a considerable following among both black and white workers in the South during the 1880s, and the Populist movement of the late 1880s and 1890s. Joseph Gerteis provides new insights and new methods for analyzing both the possibilities and limits of interracial coalition building by these two movements.

In his multilayered and nuanced work of historical sociology, Gerteis makes three interrelated

arguments. First, he argues that the question has to be reframed. The historiographical pattern by which scholars have debated the motives of white members of the Knights of Labor or the Populist movement, that is, whether they acted sincerely or cynically when they offered a hand of cooperation to their African American counterparts, misses what Gerteis believes is the better question, which is where and why these movements drew the line between inclusion and exclusion. In *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (2002), sociologist Jason Kaufman makes the keen historical insight that voluntary associations, to the extent that they represented solidarity among their members, also involved exclusion and often animus toward those excluded. Gerteis seeks to demonstrate how the Knights of Labor and the Populists followed similar patterns.

Second, Gerteis argues that the “republican emphasis on civic virtue offered a basis for cross-race organizing, but also provided restraints” (p. vii). He views republicanism as “a radicalism of

tradition” that was not a coherent ideology as much as an idiom or rhetorical pattern of expression (p. 9). Relying on labor studies of nineteenth-century “labor republicanism” and race studies of “whiteness,” he concludes that republicanism provided the frameworks for defining the included and excluded groups. And third, Gertais argues that how these frameworks were applied varied according to local contexts and over time. It is this third argument that leads Gertais to his most impressive research and most intriguing conclusions.

Class and the Color Line rests on two sets of comparative case studies. The first of these compares the relative interracial success of the Knights of Labor in Richmond, Virginia, to the relative failure in Atlanta, Georgia. Although it had separate black and white assemblies, the Knights succeeded in making Richmond a stronghold, where interracial cooperation made important strides, at least during the heyday of the Knights in the mid-1880s. The white membership of the Knights in Atlanta, by contrast, made little effort to reach out to black workers. To explain the difference, Gertais uses city directories to map data on race and occupation block by block, establishing that the African American community in Richmond was both more established and more rigidly segregated than was the case in Atlanta. From this he concludes that the degree of residential segregation in Richmond “led to a concentration of organizational and political power” in the black community (p. 86). And it was this power that led white members of the Knights to recognize the necessity of cooperation with their African American counterparts.

The second comparative case study looks at the racial politics of the People’s Party in Georgia and in Virginia. The Virginia chapter will be less familiar to readers as the Georgia chapter focuses on Populist leader Tom Watson’s tenth congressional district and other terrain covered in the Populist scholarship. But even when covering fa-

miliar ground, Gertais succeeds in steering clear of the mythic antiracist heroism of Watson and the Georgia Populists, and provides a balanced and insightful account.

To frame the local case studies, Gertais compiled extensive data on how the reform press addressed questions of inclusion and exclusion. He drew the data from three major newspapers with a national readership: *The Journal of the Knights of Labor* (1880-90), the Southern Farmers’ Alliance’s *The National Economist* edited by Charles Macune (1889-93), and *The People’s Party Paper* edited by Watson (1891-96). From this, Gertais identifies, for example, the frequency with which the Populists referred to race and economic competition, or to the Chinese question. He might have done more to connect this data with his local case studies, but they do help provide a wider national context as well as thought-provoking measures of the relative significance that reform editors placed on different themes pertaining to the relationship between race and class.

Class and the Color Line is mainly successful at its multiple levels of thoughtful analysis. However, some of the broad claims are problematic. Gertais’s emphasis on the explanatory power of the concept “republicanism” points to the limits of the concept’s value for historical analysis. He claims, for example, that both the Knights of Labor and the Populists “spoke the same language and emerged from the same republican traditions,” and that “the movements were made possible by the fact that industrial laborers, artisans, and independent farmers and tenants all came to see themselves as a class of ‘producers’ with common interests” (p. 47). But painting with such a broad “republican” brush tends to obscure more than it clarifies. For example, the Southern Farmers’ Alliance, the organization at the core of the Populist coalition, spoke a language of business professionalism and Alliance organizers saw themselves as representing farming as a commercial interest, an interest that frequently clashed

with the Knights of Labor and its language of class solidarity and labor rights. Such distinctions played a key role in decisions these movements made about who should be inside and outside their ranks.

A related problem is posed by Gertais's conclusion that the "boundaries of the movements were both inclusive and exclusive in equal measure" (p. 205). The social solidarity of the Knights, he explains, involved openness toward interracial organizing between whites and blacks, but at the same time involved demands for exclusion of Chinese and other immigrant labor. The Populists, Gertais argues, were less interested in excluding the Chinese or other foreign competition from below, but in equal measure targeted the foreign threat from "above," that is, the English banker who "became the Jewish usurer" (p. 206). This equation may make logical sense in terms of rhetorical analysis, but it is problematic history.

Most significant, Gertais tends to overlook the extent to which Populists advocated and practiced exclusion of African Americans. He mentions in passing that the Southern Farmers' Alliance barred blacks from membership. But he fails to explore the distrust and conflicts between the white Farmers' Alliance and the Colored Farmers' Alliance, or the clash with the Knights of Labor and other farm and labor groups over the question of interracial organizing, or how the expansion of the Farmers' Alliance made the principle of nonwhite exclusion a pillar of rural association in much of the country. Nor does he consider the legislative record of the Farmers' Alliance as a driving force for Jim Crow accommodation laws across the former Confederacy. Nor does he examine the views of such leading Populists as Leonidas Polk, the president of the Farmers' Alliance, or Mary Elizabeth Lease of Kansas who favored African American removal.

A political party such as the People's Party, unlike a voluntary association, was driven by the need for votes. Accordingly, when white organiz-

ers of the Farmers' Alliance joined the People's Party they made different types of decisions about race and ethnicity. Depending on the time and place, white Populists either appealed for black votes or entered into political agreements with black Republicans. But even that type of electoral interaction had its limits. By the end of the 1890s, much of what was left of the Populist movement either accommodated or actively supported the adoption of franchise restrictions and white primaries that excluded African Americans from electoral politics. In making his comparative analysis, Gertais might have taken into account the distinction between voluntary association and political party. If he had done so, at least in the southern states that he studied, African Americans would be more centrally situated in his study of inclusion and exclusion as it pertains to the Populists.

Instead, Gertais focuses on the Populists' rhetoric regarding the "London Jew" (p. 136). Since the days when Richard Hofstadter made the claim that Populism was the seedbed of American anti-Semitism (*Age of Reform, From Bryan to FDR* [1955]), historians have produced a body of literature documenting that the Populists showed tolerance toward Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities, and that the anti-Semitism to be found in Populist literature was similar to that which proliferated at the time, and often more virulently so, among American business and academic elites. This does not mean, as Jeffrey Ostler has shown, that the Populists were immune from anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.[1] But Gertais raises anti-Semitism to the central marker of the Populist boundary of exclusion. This poses a number of historical questions. Out of 948 communications regarding racial and ethnic "others" that Gertais records in the Populist press, 22 of those communications (2.3 percent) referenced Jews. At the same time, 25 of those communications (2.6 percent) referenced Chinese. Yet, according to Gertais, the Populists were not particularly concerned with the Chinese, but apparently their ref-

erences to the Jews put them “among the most vehemently exclusionary” groups of their age (p. 205). It is not clear how he arrives at this difference. Also, whereas the Knights of Labor barred Chinese membership and demanded enforcement of exclusion acts against the Chinese, and whereas the Farmers’ Alliance enforced a whites-only clause and demanded Jim Crow statutes, this leaves the question of whether it matters that in regard to actual Jews there is no corresponding evidence that the Populists either practiced or advocated exclusion.

Readers of *Class and the Color Line* will gain new insights and ways to consider the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in social movements. Imaginatively researched and clearly written, Gertais has written a smart, informative, and provocative book of value to anyone interested in the confounding relationship between race and class in American history.

Note

[1]. Jeffrey Ostler, “The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism,” *Agricultural History* 69 (1995): 1-27.

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