

Reviewed by Andrew E. Barnes (Arizona State University)

Published on H-Africa (September, 2022)

Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

The twenty-first century has seen a growing recognition by scholars of the falsity of the nineteenth-century European notion that European societies had evolved in social and biological isolation from other old-world populations and hence the viability of ideas about “pure races” as the starting point for construction of arguments about nationalism. The two books under discussion in this review take the search for a historical understanding to replace the old notions of Europe’s racial past in opposing directions. Olivette Otele’s *African Europeans: An Untold Story*, makes a case first that peoples of African descent have been a discernible racial minority in Europe since the era of the Roman empire, and second, that since Roman times, as a racial minority, peoples of African descent have suffered from forms of discrimination and oppression that continue to be repeated in the present. Otele sees the George Floyd tragedy not as just an incident in the racial history of the United States, but as reflective of a historical pattern of interaction between peoples of African and peoples of European descent. The point of her survey of race relations past and present in Europe is to provide those sympathetic to the Black Lives Matter movement with the historical knowledge they need for their struggle. Richard C. Maguire’s *Africans in East Anglia* builds an argument for race as a designation for people of African descent in England as a bourgeois construct developed and promoted across England most systematically by participants in the Atlantic slave trade and Atlantic colonial plantation economies. Maguire situates his study in the tradition of British Marxist labor history and seeks to show the ongoing utility of E. P. Thompson’s classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) for comprehending English social history. In the western regions of Eng-
land, centered around the town of Norwich, Maguire find that individuals recognizable as Africans appear in the archival record on a progressively more regular basis starting at the end of the fifteenth century. Yet, other than notations of phenotypic appearance, the archival records show no evidence of Africans as distinct or different from other immigrant peoples entering the region. Rather, and this is Maguire’s point, peoples of African descent are recognized in the archival record as members of the English working class, with lives conforming to working-class norms of work and lifestyle. African peoples start being noted as racially distinct only at the end of the seventeenth century, when participants in the Atlantic economy begin to settle in the region and have some impact on regional culture and society. It is from that point forward that notions of race begin to trump notions of class. Still, through the start of the nineteenth century, the cutoff point for Maguire’s study, the patterns of discrimination and oppression talked about by Otele are not a discernible feature of race relations in the region.

In different ways and for different reasons, methodology would be an issue raised about both studies by some historians. Otele’s study is surprisingly Eurocentric in its one-to-one equation of European history with world civilization. To be fair, Otele’s study is more concerned with the present than the past and she shows a fair amount of due diligence in scouring the European past for illustration of her thesis. The best chapter and primary reward for reading the book is the last chapter, where she offers a wide-ranging survey of race and gender in contemporary Europe from the perspective of identity politics. In the 1990s, the writings of John and Jean Comaroff questioned the value of using archival materials as a mirror of social and cultural realities. Though they are not mentioned, Maguire’s monograph is a remarkable rebuttal to their argument. Meticulously, Maguire combed the state and church archives for the East Anglia region to discover every citation of individuals of African descent. To the extent to which records reveal racism, he makes a plausible argument that racism was a trapping of the rise of the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, that is not the main argument he is trying to make. He wants to affirm that peoples of African descent living in East Anglia absorbed working-class consciousness. His argument here is completely constructed from silence. Strikingly, in a twenty-first-century historical study dedicated to the discussion of Afro-English consciousness, he does not quote or communicate the thinking of a single East Anglian of African descent. Maybe peoples of African descent shared the values and sensibilities of their non-African neighbors; maybe after generations of intermarriage they lost all awareness of their distant African ancestors, but Maguire offers no evidence to prove either conclusion.

Again, in differing ways, both of these works suggest that what W. E. B. Du Bois famously labeled “the problem of the color line” persists into the twentieth-first century. Neither work finds a way to fit the Europeans who resulted from unions between peoples of African and European descent cleanly into its argument. Otele’s book takes identity politics as its starting point. The only way it can fit these individuals into its argument is by postulating that they have a “dual heritage,” leaving unexplained just what the term means and how it should be understood to have operated as a historical phenomenon. Maguire insists that the term “mulatto” had no regional parlance until retired West Indian plantation owners introduced it into the archival record, raising the question of just how the phenotypic legacies of African ancestry were (or were not) acknowledged by locals before the eighteenth century. An interesting question prompted by Maguire’s research in fact is whether “mulatto” was used in eighteenth-century East Anglia in much the same way that the term “mestizo” was used in eighteenth-century Mexico, to signal a form of creolization that involved both phenotypical as well as cultural amalgamation. Both Otele’s work and Maguire’s work represent a movement away from a conceptualization of
Europe's racial past held in thrall to the needs of European nationalists. Both, though, struggle to make the new historical understanding confirm arguments about race and class from the last century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57080

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.