

The Paradox of the White Worker Studies in Race Formation

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Volume 30, 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t30re03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Ignatiev, N. (1992). The Paradox of the White Worker Studies in Race Formation. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 30, 233–240.

The Paradox of the White Worker: Studies in Race Formation

Noel Ignatiev

Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London and New York: Verso 1990).

David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso 1991).

THE NEW LABOUR HISTORY, associated in American with the name of Herbert Gutman, shifted attention away from unions and other institutions toward the daily life of working people. It broke new ground in examining the role of the family, the community, and culture in forming the working class. In treating working people as the subjects of their own activity, the Gutman school broke with the labour historians who preceded it. However, in its attitude toward the race problem it continued the tradition established earlier within Old Left circles, of substituting an abstract notion of the working class for the lived experience of working people.¹ Unable to deny entirely the record of white labour in accepting and promoting racial distinctions, the new labour historians treated white supremacy as peripheral to the main line of working-class formation and struggle. Rarely did they ask what the labour movement looked like from the perspective of the slave worker kept in bondage by the alliance of slaveholders, financiers, and white labourers known as

¹Old Left labour historians, notwithstanding valuable work they did on Afro-American history, never allowed the race question to interfere with their celebration of what they called the labour movement. For examples see Anthony Bimba, *The History of the American Working Class* (New York 1927), Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story* (New York 1955), or the work of Philip S. Foner. The criticisms of Gutman's work I make here are not intended to invalidate his contributions to the field of Afro-American history, for example, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York 1976). The problem I am addressing is his failure to locate slavery and freedom in their proper place in the history of the working class in America.

Noel Ignatiev, "The Paradox of the White Worker: Studies in Race Formation," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 233-40.

the Democratic Party, or the free black worker denied land and employment, or the Chinese worker barred from the country by the power of organized labour. In failing to do so they were reneging on their promise to write history "from the bottom up" — the watchword of the new historians.

The most sympathetic explanation that can be offered for the Gutman school's blind spot on race is that it was motivated by the search for a tradition that could serve as the starting point for the sort of labour movement they hoped would emerge — the famous "usable past." But the selective lens used in the search involved denial, and denial led to apologetics. Among the earliest and certainly the most influential of the white labour apologetics to come out of the New Labour History was Gutman's own 1968 essay, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America," in which he portrayed the turn-of-the-century UMWA, despite shortcomings, as an outpost of working-class solidarity.²

Gutman's assertion was bound to provoke a response, and in 1988 Herbert Hill published "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America." In that essay, Hill, examining the sources Gutman used, arrived at quite different conclusions, and accused Gutman of fostering "a revived populist neo-Marxism that advanced the ideology of working class consciousness and solidarity against the social realities of race."³ His essay touched off a new

²First published in *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, ed., Julius Jacobson (New York 1970), and later republished in Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York 1977).

³*International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 2 (Winter 1988), 132-200, quote from 133. The next issue carried a number of replies to Hill, and the one following it a rejoinder by Hill. See also Herbert Hill, "Race, Ethnicity and Organized Labor: The Opposition to Affirmative Action," *New Politics*, 1 (Winter 1987) and the exchanges in the following issue for a discussion of related questions. While Hill was not the first to dissent from the white-centric view of the working class (there is a long critical tradition among Afro-American historians and publicists going back to Du Bois, Garvey, and Charles H. Wesley), he was the first to devote major attention to the canonical text of the Gutman school. For other criticisms of the New Labour History on this score, see Lawrence T. McDonnell, "'You Are Too Sentimental': Problems and Suggestions for a New Labor History," *Journal of Social History*, 17 (Summer 1984), 629-54, and Michael Kazin, "Marxism and the Search for a Synthesis of U.S. Labor History," *Labor History*, 28 (Fall 1987), 497-514. (One need not accept Kazin's conclusions about the uselessness of the class struggle interpretation as a tool of historical analysis to appreciate his criticisms of the Gutman school.) In a comment on the Hill debate, Nell Irvin Painter wrote, "Much of the new labor history has downplayed or completely overlooked racism, and for years I have been nipping at the heels of some of the best-known, if not the greatest offenders, David Montgomery and Sean Wilentz, insisting that their writing as well as their teaching needs to recognize the ugly American fact of racism, and not simply as a problem for non-whites or a minor theme in American life." *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 2 (Spring 1989), 369. See also my essay, "Matewan: the Film and the History," in *Red Balloon*, Spring 1988.

round of debate; pivotal to it was an examination of the dual character of the white worker. As Steven Shulman, wrote,

the white working class is composed of whites as well as of workers. Both aspects of its identity are social relationships in the sense of being socially constructed processes which define group identities and interests. Just as the class-for-itself bears a systematic relationship to the class-in-itself, the racial ideologies of the white working class (as well as of all other classes) are systematically related to its construction and reconstruction of a racial hierarchy. The origin of its racial ideologies is not external to itself. The white working class adopts racial ideologies because it exists racially.⁴

It is in the context of the debate over the role of race in forming (or preventing the formation of) a working class in America that I undertake to discuss two recent books, part of the Haymarket Series that Verso Press has begun publishing under the general editorship of Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker. As wide-ranging essays in political and cultural history, neither book conforms to the characteristic model of the New Labour History, the close-grained study of a group of people in a single locale or industry.

Alexander Saxton sets out to explore continuity and change in the ideology of white racial superiority in the US. He sees little difficulty in understanding how the theory of white superiority arose out of the need to vindicate a class of people that grew rich from the slave trade, slavery, and the expropriation of land from non-white populations; the more formidable problem is to explain why non-slaveholding whites acquiesced either in planter dominance or its justifications.⁵ To organize that acquiescence is the function of ideology, a system of ideas which rationalizes experience to enable a particular group to present its interests as those of the entire society. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, then, is a study of the role of white supremacy in legitimating the changing class coalitions that ruled the USA in the 19th century. It is divided into three parts, the first on national Republicanism and the triumph of the Jacksonian opposition, the second on

⁴*International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 2 (Spring 1989), 364. I would have preferred that Shulman refer to "white workers" rather than to the "white working class"; to me, a racially-defined working class is an absurdity.

⁵In discussing the origins of white racism, Saxton recognizes the need to account for initial steps toward race discrimination without invoking race prejudice as a cause. He believes that Edmund Morgan provides the key by showing how 17th-century Virginians established slavery through a series of rational responses to problems that had nothing to do with race prejudice, and that race prejudice followed. Since Saxton's focus is elsewhere I shall not dwell on this point, but I cannot help noting that the problem of circularity reappears as soon as the question, "Why were Africans enslaved in Virginia?" is rotated to "Why were Europeans not enslaved?" For a fuller discussion of this point, see Theodore William Allen, "Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race," *Radical America*, 9 (May-June, 1975).

elements which pointed toward a transition, the third on the Republican synthesis that emerged out of the regrouping of class forces.

The National Republican Party attempted to maintain an alliance between northern commerce and manufacturing and southern planters. As Saxton points out, divergent regional interests made it impossible before it began. Northern manufacturers feared the high labour costs that would result from free access to land; hence they opposed unrestricted settlement of the west.⁶ Southern slave-based agriculture desired unlimited expansion into new territory. The conflict between these social forces took the form of a difference over Indian policy: while the manufacturing-commercial sectors sought to use the Indian communities to retard white settlement, the planters stood for unlimited expropriation of the native peoples. The National Republicans, realizing that a defence of Indian rights would prove unpopular, took their stand against the expansion of slavery. The strains within national Republicanism led to its disintegration: one faction joined the Whig Party, while the other supported Jacksonian Democracy, which emerged as the champion of free land for white settlers. During the period of Jacksonian rule, "white racism defined the boundaries of republicanism and justified the problematic empathy developing between urban egalitarians and planter oligarchs." (127)

The Jacksonian coalition, which rested on the support of urban workers and petit-bourgeois, yeoman farmers, aspirant entrepreneurs, and southern planters, contained within itself the seeds of collapse, because the needs of the planters for more territory for slavery collided with the demand for free settler land. The Democracy became increasingly a regional party, committed to defending slavery by federal power. (In the South, white egalitarianism presented a formidable problem to the planter class.) The Mexican War and the Wilmot Proviso brought the tensions to a head; the emergence of the Free Soil Party in 1848 marked the breakdown of Jacksonianism, as "the legitimizing construct pressed into service to hold together the Jacksonian coalition in the 1830s and early 1840s ended by legitimizing the defection of its northern and western constituencies." (154)

Contrary to the fictions of the white labour apologists, "the hard side of racism generally appeared in nineteenth-century America as a corollary to egalitarianism." (186) Whiggery was shaped, above all, by class position; within the Whig social hierarchy, "racial difference could be viewed ... [as] simply one among many." (70) Northern Whig employers felt the greatest threat from the insurgent immigrant population, while their attitude toward non-whites was often one of tolerant condescension. For the Jacksonians, needing to cement a coalition based on white egalitarianism, racial distinctions were central. Saxton looks at how the popular press, stage, and the minstrel show reflected and shaped the ideology of white supremacy. "Vernacular characters," he writes, "including those in blackface,

⁶A similar policy on the part of Governor Berkeley sparked Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

displayed the ideas and attitudes of *herrenvolk* democracy. Their natural proclivity was to the hard side of racism." (120) Accordingly, "class differentials dissolve into a sentimental oneness of the white *herrenvolk*." (123) He also examines how before the Civil War American high culture, including Irving, Bryant, Cooper, Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe, and Duykinck, belonged to the Democrats.⁷

Out of the breakdown of the Jacksonian coalition emerged the Republican synthesis — free soil (for whites), free (white) labour, free (white) men. Part of the effort to wrest the banner of nationalism from Democratic hands was the promotion of new symbols. By the 1850s, Republican ideological entrepreneurs had managed to construct a western vernacular hero who was a "frontispiece for the Free Soil movement." (196) Saxton uses the journalist, publisher, and adventurer George Wilkes to illustrate the transition of white artisan egalitarianism from the workingmen's parties of the late 1820s to the urban radical wing of Jacksonian Democracy and thence into the Free Soil alliance.

The Civil War began, as Frederick Douglass said, with both sides fighting for slavery: the South to take it out of the Union, the north to keep it in. Yet the logic of events compelled the north, in order to overturn the rule of the planter class, to strike at the basis of its power, the slave system, and to enfranchise the freedmen. Revolutionary measures, however, were at bottom incompatible with the aims of those who led the Republican Party.⁸ "Success of the party's 'northern strategy' made possible a turn away from its 'southern strategy'." (260) White supremacy, which had been temporarily shaken, was restored as an element of the governing coalition. Saxton shows how the campaign for Chinese exclusion, which grew out of the ideology begat by Indian wars, slavery, and war with Mexico, was transported back east "in a kind of feedback loop" (313) to undermine the gains made by Afro-Americans during Reconstruction. The trade unions, which had received a tremendous stimulus from the Civil War, helped to recreate the white supremacist synthesis; craft unionism, the dominant form of labour organization, resulted from and reinforced racial exclusiveness.

The 1890s were years of crisis for the moral and cultural authority of the ruling class. Yet capital managed to ride out the storm. Why did Populism, Saxton asks, fail to provide an alternative to the existing party system? His answer is that Populism, eager for an alliance with organized labour, oriented its efforts toward the existing craft unions rather than toward the unorganized industrial mass.⁹ Thus,

⁷He includes Melville in this catalogue. For different readings, see Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America*, (Baton Rouge 1980) and Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley 1979).

⁸Saxton treats the Radical Republicans as the left wing of a bourgeois project. For a different interpretation, see my article in *Labour/Le Travail* (forthcoming).

⁹Saxton overlooks the racially restricted character of Debs' American Railway Union, which permits him to exaggerate the dependency of white supremacy on craft unionism.

"white racism both in the agrarian South and industrializing North tended to stabilize industrial capitalism." (369) The result was the Rough Rider (in retrospect) — the "mix of white egalitarianism with imperial authority and Christian mission." (376)

In looking at the USA not simply as a republic, or even a bourgeois republic, but, as part of its definition, a *white* bourgeois republic, Saxton has indicated a direction for others to follow. David Roediger also explores the problem of white ideology, with specific attention to the working class. He asks "why the white working class settles for being white" (6) and finds the answer in W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of the "public and psychological wage." The "pleasures of whiteness could function as a wage" (13) which led "many workers [to] define themselves as white." (6) To trace the evolution and effects of that wage is the task of *The Wages of Whiteness*. Although Roediger locates himself within the "broad tradition" of the new labour history, and uses Marxist tools, he acknowledges that "the new labor history has hesitated to explore 'whiteness' and white supremacy as creations, in part, of the white working class itself" (9) and that "the main body of writing by white Marxists in the United States has both 'naturalized' whiteness and oversimplified race, reproduc[ing] the weaknesses of both American liberalism and neo-conservatism." (6)

"Working class formation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand for the US white working class," writes Roediger. (8) "The words *white* and *worker* ... became meaningfully paired only in the nineteenth century." (20) Before that time the range of dependent relationships did not permit the existence of either a true working class or a sharp distinction between freedom and slavery. The success of the Revolution in spreading the idea of independence fixed the colour line. White servitude was gradually abolished, while the chains were tightened on black labour. As a result, blackness became identified with dependency, a condition suspect in republican eyes. "White revolutionary pride could thus open the way to republican racism." (35)

With the rise of the factory system, white workers developed new terms to conceal (from themselves) their growing subordination to capital: *servant* became *help*, and *master* (a term so offensive that people turned to Dutch for a substitute) gave way to *boss*. White labour opposition to abolition was driven by the fear that it was a scheme of the employers "to break down the distinctive barrier between the colors that the poor whites may gradually sink into the degraded condition of Negroes." (58) Poor whites gained the vote as free Afro-Americans lost it; *freeman* came to mean adult white male.

If the colour line paid a "public and psychological wage," the cost was a "debased republicanism," condemnation to "lifelong wage labor." (55) Roediger examines how 19th-century white workers used the language of "white" and "wage" slavery not to express solidarity with the slave, but "as a call to arms to end the inappropriate oppression of whites." (68) Part of his accomplishment is to explode the myth built up around George Henry Evans, Seth Luther, and other early

labour radicals who have been mistakenly portrayed as pro-abolitionist. The inability of white labour to escape the framework of the white republic guaranteed that no distinctive "labour wing" of abolitionism could develop. (While he devotes little attention to Afro-Americans or abolitionists, his research supports the conclusion that the most consistent representatives of universal working-class interests were to be found not in the early trade union movement but in the institutions which grew out of the Afro-American community, including radical abolitionism.)

White workers projected onto Afro-Americans (and Indians) the characteristics they themselves carried from their preindustrial past and were desperately trying to shed — sexual freedom, the connection to nature, and a sense of play. The minstrel stage defined whiteness by creating blackness. Paradoxically it also "offered the possibilities that, via blackface, preindustrial joys could survive amidst industrial discipline." (118) Public festivals and race riots, in which mobs of working-class whites, often dressed in blackface, attacked Afro-Americans, expressed the desire for "respectable rowdiness and safe rebellion." (127)

Of all the European immigrant groups in antebellum America, the Irish had undergone the most abrupt shift from preindustrial to industrial conditions. They desperately sought to distance themselves from Afro-Americans in order to overcome nativist prejudices against them. Their efforts revealed the contradictions in their situation: "the blackface wore rather thin when, for example, Irish minstrels sang laments by 'slaves' involuntarily removed from home and family." (119)

Right up to the Civil War, white labour could not imagine that its freedom was in any way connected to the emancipation of the slave. The ending of slavery posed a crisis for "white" workers by calling into question their definition of themselves as "not slaves." It also, as Du Bois pointed out, presented the greatest opportunity the country ever saw to build a truly national labour movement. Yet, with few exceptions, "white workers continued to observe war and emancipation through a lens of race." (177) Even during the labour uprising of 1877 white strike leaders sought to distance themselves from black participants. They regarded it as ridiculous for Afro-Americans to work alongside whites and criminal for them to take the jobs of whites during strikes. Roediger concludes with an appropriate symbol: by the end of Reconstruction, "white workers were still tragically set on keeping even John Henry [the steel-driving man, subject of "the noblest American ballad of them all"] out of the House of Labor." (181)¹⁰

From the standpoint of a consistent class-struggle interpretation of race it is possible to find fault with both of these books. In admitting that "physical differences between groups may be easily visible and are certainly real" (14) and chiding Barbara Fields for her "failure to distinguish between *race* as an objectively visible fact and *racism* as an ideological construct," (20) Saxton concedes too much to the naturalists. Differences between individuals are real, but differences between

¹⁰The quoted words in parentheses are from Pete Seeger, *American Favorite Ballads* (New York 1961), 82.

"groups" presuppose the existence of groups — precisely what must be accounted for. Roediger's insistence that "the white worker arrived in the early nineteenth century" (20) begs the question of why slavery developed on a racial basis, which set the terms for the triumph of white republicanism in place of, say, the non-racial communism of Bacon's Rebellion or even the New York Conspiracy of 1741. Moreover, neither book satisfactorily explains why some workers acted white. Saxton says they did so because they "shared willingly, if not equally, in the profits of racial exploitation." (387) No one has ever managed to show how the profit-sharing takes place, and Saxton does not even try. Roediger says they did so in return for a "psychological wage"; yet without an attendant material advantage, what would be the psychological value of the white skin? Standing at the head of the employment line and the rear of the layoff line and holding a monopoly of the best jobs may not entitle the white worker to a share of the profits, but the pay is more than psychological.

In the present debates among labour historians over the need to address the paradox of the white worker, the issues I raise are small. Both of these books are welcome challenges to the old and new mythmakers.



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