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Racializing Class, Classifying Race

Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa

Edited by

Peter Alexander
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
Rand Afrikaans University
Johannesburg
South Africa

and

Rick Halpern
Reader in the History of the United States
University College London

in association with
ST ANTONY’S COLLEGE
OXFORD
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Notes on the Contributors

Peter Alexander now Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, South Africa, was, until recently, a Research Fellow at St. Antony’s College, Oxford. His latest book, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid*, is forthcoming from James Currey. Currently he is working on a comparative study of Transvaal and Alabama colliers in the early twentieth century.

Carolyn A. Brown is an Associate Professor of History at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and a specialist in West African labour history. Her book, ‘*We Weren’t All Slaves*: African Miners, Culture and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery, Nigeria, 1914–1950’, is part of Heinemann’s Social History of Africa Series. Currently she is working on a social history of Enugu during the nationalist period.

Frederick Cooper is Professor of African History at the University of Michigan. His most recent book is *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, and he has also edited (with Ann Stoler) *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. His research interests include the comparative study of colonial empires, conceptions of Africa within the social sciences, post-emancipation societies and labour history.

Colin J. Davis is Associate Professor of History, University of Alabama at Birmingham. His most recent publication is *Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen’s Strike*. Currently he is working on a comparative study of docker rank-and-file movements in New York City and London in the post-Second World War era.

Diane Frost is Lecturer in Race and Ethnic Studies at the University of Central Lancashire. She has published two books and numerous articles on West African migrant labour in Britain. Currently she is developing her research on Sierra Leonan migrants.

Venus Green is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the City College of the City University of New York where she

**Rick Halpern** is Reader in the History of the United States at University College London. He is the author of *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904–1954* and currently is working on a study of race and labour in the sugar industries of Louisiana and Natal, South Africa.

**A. Yvette Huginnie** is an Assistant Professor in American Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Currently she is working on a study of race, labour and politics in the US West from 1850 to 1920.

**Kenneth Lunn** is Reader in Social History at the University of Portsmouth. He has published on various aspects of race and immigration in modern British history and currently is working on a study of race and the British labour movement, 1870–1970.

**Gary Minkley** is Senior Lecturer in South African History at the University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town, South Africa. He has published on local South African labour histories and a manuscript, entitled ‘Border Dialogues: Race, Class and Space in the Industrialisation of East London, South Africa’, is in preparation. Currently he is working on the spatial and labour histories of Cape Town in comparative perspective.

**David Montgomery** is Farnam Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University. His most recent book is *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century*. He is currently writing a history of the Left in the twentieth-century United States.

**Satnam Virdee** is Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Government at the University of Strathclyde. His main research interests include racist and anti-racist collective action in trade unions; racist violence; and the political economy of racism. He is the author of *Racial Violence and Harassment* and co-author of the 1997 edition of *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Currently he is at work on a book on ‘race’ and organized labour in England.
Introduction

The essays collected in this volume explore the interplay of race and class across three continents. Although the geographic sweep is wide – ranging from the copper belt of the American Southwest, to the docks of London’s East End and the coal mines of Nigeria – the contributions all have a common concern with the construction of working-class identities. Similarly, although the various authors employ a range of methodologies and situate themselves in a number of academic disciplines, they share a materialist orientation to the study of the past. While sensitive to the roles of culture and ideology in shaping collective identities, they seek to ground group consciousness firmly within economic life and the labour process. In its empirical approach to recovering the past, this collection dissents from the notion that attention to language is the best – if not the only – way to analyse working people’s motivations and thought. The international perspective afforded by this book emerges out of a conviction that the framework of the nation-state both confines and distorts labour history. Particularist and exceptionalist historiographic traditions limit historians’ abilities to fully grasp processes of class formation, while the often unthinking adoption of the ‘nation’ as a unit of study cramps their understanding of the imperial – and, indeed, the global – dimension of working-class history.

If working-class identities are ‘constructed’, they are not assembled with complete freedom from a limitless range of possibilities. Workers’ agency is a key feature in all the essays that follow, and many of these pieces probe the way in which working people imagine themselves as part of a collectivity larger than the workplace, the community and the nation. But at the same time the essays gathered here chart the limitations of this agency. They show how it is constrained, on the one hand, by the ability of employers to exacerbate pre-existing tensions and divisions within the working class and, on the other hand, by the cultural and ideological resources at the disposal of the state. Far from seeing identities as imposed from above – either by capital, culture brokers or political leaders – these essays regard them as the outcomes of processes of negotiation within which working people’s power is limited and contingent.

This book originated with a conference on labour and difference
held at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, in the summer of 1997. This was a remarkable gathering of labour historians, certainly one of the largest ever convened in Britain, and it sparked a number of lively exchanges between Africanists, Americanists and British historians. David Montgomery provided the keynote address, and a revised version of his wide-ranging meditation on the international dimension of working-class mobilization opens this volume. It is followed by three pieces – by Yvette Huginnie, Venus Green and Colin Davis – which examine the way in which racial difference functions in three very different American settings: the Southwest, the workplace world of telephone operators in the twentieth century, and the heavily Irish New York (and London) docks. In each case, traditional assumptions about race are challenged. Huginnie shows how the fluid multiracial system of turn-of-the-century Arizona subverts the standard binary understanding of race as a black/white division. Examining employment practices within the Bell system, Green demonstrates the central importance of gender assumptions shared by both managers and workers in creating an ideology of ‘whiteness’. And Davis, in a study of dock workers of Irish descent, contrasts New York, where there was an emphasis on Irishness, with London, where this was not the case, thereby pointing to the importance of broad societal influences in the construction of identities.

The next three essays focus upon Great Britain. Kenneth Lunn provides a critical reflection on the historiography of ‘race’ and labour, rejecting those accounts which either homogenize the history of immigrant workers – as in ‘the black experience’ – or oversimplify the impact of colonialism on working-class consciousness. Satnam Virdee’s contribution analyses the relationship between Indian and Afro-Caribbean workers and the labour movement in the postwar period. He chronicles a shift from exclusionary to racially integrated practices, rooting his account in the increased prevalence of broadly-based, as distinct from sectional, trade union actions. Diane Frost employs an international framework to explore the role of race in structuring both class and intra-class relations in the ports of Liverpool and Freetown in West Africa. Focusing on the Kru – who were active in both seaports – she shows how their ethnic identity was wrapped up with a defence of occupational niches, recognizing that both these aspects of their lives were shaped by the requirements of empire.

These themes of domination, conflict and identity receive further elaboration in two other essays in African labour history. Looking at
the Nigerian coal industry in the 1930s and 1940s, Carolyn Brown shows how miners rejected the racialized category of ‘African worker’ utilized by mine operators and colonial authorities. Drawing upon notions of British subjecthood and manliness, miners fashioned an identity for themselves that allowed a powerful challenge to employers and the state. Gary Minkley’s essay also explores the interplay between colonial ideology and African labour. Placing the South African port of East London alongside the larger waterfront hubs of Durban, Lourenço Marques and Mombasa, he shows how the gradual shift from a casual to a permanent dock labour force changed the way in which colonial officials viewed the relation between race and class. He also makes clear how the distinctive pattern of working-class formation found in southern Africa – most notably its partial and incomplete nature – shaped workers’ consciousness.

Frederick Cooper’s essay on boundaries and connections in the study of labour rounds out this collection and serves as a conclusion. Elaborating upon themes that ran through the forty-odd papers presented at the Oxford conference, and amplifying the main arguments of the essays presented in this collection, Cooper suggests a number of different ways of understanding the relationship between race and class. Positioning his remarks in relation to recent scholarship in the United States, Africa and Britain, and linking the study of labour to ongoing political developments in these three locales, his essay both summarizes the contributions of this project to working-class history and serves as an agenda for future research.

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Peter Alexander, Johannesburg
Rick Halpern, London