

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Racializing Class, Classifying Race: A Conference on Labour and Difference in Africa, the United States, and Britain

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The conference “Racializing Class, Classifying Race” held at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford on July 11–13, 1997, was by any measure a resounding success. Due largely to the quality of the papers and the comments of discussants and audience members alike, the conference stimulated widespread discussion—but not agreement. The theme was a propitious one, coming at a time when race and the analytical model of “whiteness” have captured center stage among many labor and social historians. The comparative theme was intended to draw together analyses of race and labor, highlighting connections and disjunctures. The first panel, “Race and Labour in a Wider Context,” established the tone of the conference. Papers by Robert Gregg, Thomas Holt, and David Feldman examined divergent topics such as the failure of E. P. Thompson to integrate race into his work, the inadequacies of current definitions of race, and how the state defines citizenship. Shula Marks questioned, however, whether racism had changed its character, and contended that criticism of Thompson smacked of presentism.

David Montgomery provided the keynote address, “Empire, Race, and Working-Class Mobilizations.” In a sweeping but tightly organized presentation, Montgomery argued that “history is a collective project” that has local, national, and global dimensions. Moving across time and space, Montgomery highlighted the constant “reinvention of race” and cautioned that race has never been a “simple dichotomy of black and white.” In what could be a slogan for the whole conference, Montgomery finished his address by stating that the “dialogue of race and class has not been resolved.”

Changing definitions of race were ably discussed in the panel on “Labour and Law.” Papers by Eric Arnesen and David Anderson pinpointed how workers successfully have used legal strategies to gain a semblance of either protection or justice. Neville Rubin was far more cautionary in his discussion of affirmative action policies in Namibia, however. As with all

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legal strategies, he said, it is one thing to pass a law, quite another to enforce it. In the panel on "Racism, Violence, and the Working Class," stark evidence was provided of how white brutality has also defined race. Papers by Jeremy Krikler, Ian Ochiltree, and Nan Woodruff highlighted how racial violence performed the function of policing. The connective tissue in the three papers included white fear and the role of the state. War was also a catalyst in undermining the color line, thus encouraging white violence to reestablish racial segregation and oppression of blacks in the Deep South of the United States and in South Africa.

Another panel considered "Gender, Race, and Labour." Tera Hunter discussed female African-American domestics in Atlanta and Philadelphia. She focused on strategies of cooperation and differences in the choice of whether to "live in" with employers or to "live out." Venus Green examined the changing racial composition of telephone operators in the United States. Initially, African-American women were excluded from such jobs, but by the 1960s such jobs were almost exclusively black. Simon Katzenellenbogen also spread a wide net by discussing "Women and Racism in Africa," arguing that women organized there in their own self-interest against colonial authorities. In her comments on the panel, Deborah Gaitskell asserted that racism needs to be periodized and that the indirect constraints on black workers' ability to enter jobs previously held by white women need to be further examined.

A panel on "Race and the Organization of Labour" addressed questions about efforts by trade unions to organize black workers, and the limitations of those efforts. Alex Lichtenstein showed how the presence of Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions in southern US shipyards led to greater organization of black workers, while the opposite was true when American Federation of Labor affiliates predominated. Michael Honey argued that the CIO was an important vehicle for black advancement, but when the CIO moved away from biracial unionism after World War Two the union movement lost momentum. Satnam Virdee's examination of British trade unionism highlighted an increasing focus on racism by the labor movement during the 1970s, as framed by a hostile state. Nancy Clark's analysis of the South African labor movement was far from optimistic. In his comments on the panel, Roger Horowitz cautioned participants not to expect too much from labor movements and to recognize the constraints imposed by power.

In a panel on the "Waterfront," Gary Minkley discussed the changing conditions of social control on the East London docks, while Christopher Saunders highlighted the occupational solidarity of dockers in New Orleans and Cape Town. Two other papers also had a comparative perspective. Colin Davis examined the ethnicity of London Irish and New York Irish dockers, and Diane Frost raised issues of identity among West African and British seamen. The panel, "The Meaning of Whiteness," witnessed a wide-ranging discussion on an important topic. David Brundage called for

more historical specificity and theoretical rigor on the issue, while Yvette Huginnie and Dana Frank discussed the creation of whiteness among Mexican-Americans and the establishment by white women of sexual space. (Frank's paper, "White Working-Class Women and the Race Question," will appear in expanded form in *ILWCH* 54 [Fall 1998].)

An interesting panel on "Thinking About Race and Class" combined theoretical analysis and historical inquiry. Papers by Dan Letwin, Stan Nadel, Earl Lewis, and Susan Pennybacker and James A. Miller considered issues such as "social equality," "multidimensional identity," "social status," and "racial politics." In an overview, commentator Ira Katznelson called for "theory closer to the ground." Although the papers brought "freshness," he said, the "political" appeared to be missing from these analyses.

For the closing remarks of the conference, Frederick Cooper had the "impossible" task of formulating an evaluation. Cooper started by stating that the papers did more to "juxtapose" than to "link" human experience across the geographies of Africa, Great Britain, and the United States. Cooper tempered this statement by acknowledging that a "theory of identity formation" is not needed—and perhaps is impossible to achieve. "What does one do," he asked, "with the individuals who don't quite fit?" One solution, Cooper argued, is to move away from the Eurocentric notion of "groups" to that of "networks" in order to identify "linkages" to provide a "range of possible outcomes." As Cooper conceded, "it is an immensely complicated and contradictory story"—but one that needs to be told.

As stated earlier, the conference was indeed a success for several reasons—but principally because of its organization. The steering committee did an excellent job in matching supposedly disparate papers to thematic panels. Just as useful was the role of discussants—they did the difficult job of providing the audience with a sense of connection, although it must be said that some discussants took too much time in their evaluation of the papers. Peter Alexander, the principal organizer, must be applauded for coping with the countless details associated with a large conference and the great number of fine scholars in attendance. Although there were some murmurings that class and gender had not been given their due, these comments in some sense must have reflected how stimulating these discussions were. Although a consensus was not achieved (how could one expect otherwise?), the comparative structure of the conference accomplished a cross-fertilization of ideas that is relatively rare in such settings. The conference truly advanced the debate about race and "whiteness," taking it beyond simple dichotomies while ushering in further problems of definition.