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The Enduring Significance of Black and Multiracial Working-Class History

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

The Enduring Significance of Black and Multiracial Working-Class History

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Traci Parker, *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement: Workers, Consumers, and Civil Rights from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019)

Touré F. Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case against Race Reductionism* (London: Verso Books, 2020)

Joe William Trotter Jr., *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019)

FOR DECADES, MANY OF THE MOST EXCITING – and sometime most heated – debates in African American and labour historiography have been related to the intersections of class and race. North America's working classes have historically consisted of labourers with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and such diversity has both helped and hurt labour movements across space and time. In short, racial and ethnic tensions have plagued the workers' movement for centuries. At the same time, immigrants, native-born whites, and African Americans have both joined and led labour unions as well as staged strikes and protests, recognizing the obvious value of collective battles against bosses and the politicians who have dutifully served their interests. More than any other group of scholars, labour historians deserve primary credit for producing books and articles that emphasize at least five significant areas of focus: characteristics of African American slavery; the various struggles of free Black workers; instances of interracial working-class conflicts; examples of class divisions within African American communities; and "whiteness studies" – scholarship that focuses on the "white skin privilege" supposedly enjoyed by European American workers both in and outside of work sites.

Not all subjects have garnered the same levels of academic popularity or institutional legitimacy. Scholarship about free and unfree Black workers as well as “whiteness studies” have mostly thrived.¹ Studies of slavery, most of which are written by those who *do not* identify as labour historians, continue to be churned out at a steady clip and remain widely read and discussed. These scholars generally refer to themselves as historians of African Americans, and their scholarship tends to frame divisions and tensions through a race relations lens, as opposed to a labour or class conflict framework.² Publications about interracial organizing have made less of an impact in and outside of the academy, though we can point to numerous significant studies that reveal the power of class solidarity across racial lines during dramatic labour actions involving coal miners, farmers, longshoremen, prisoners, sales clerks, soldiers, and others.³ Yet some of the most enthusiastic self-identified African

1. On “whiteness studies,” see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Books, 1991); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1, *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York: Verso Books, 1994); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Not all three of these authors share the same perspectives, but they nevertheless identified as labour historians and helped to inspire many scholars outside of this subject. Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness*, for instance, has had an especially meaningful impact on the profession. According to Google Scholar, it has been cited 8,400 times.

2. Some prominent writers of influential books about Black slavery, including Philip Foner, Herbert Gutman, Ira Berlin, and Jacqueline Jones, have identified as labour historians. A few proudly embraced this identity, though it is fair to say that most historians of slavery distance themselves from the “labour history” label. Julie Greene, “In Memoriam: Ira Berlin (1941–2018),” *Perspectives on History*, 1 October 2018, [https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2018/ira-berlin-\(1941-2018\)](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2018/ira-berlin-(1941-2018)). For a useful critique of those who overemphasize racial identities over material conditions, see Brian Kelly, “No Easy Way Through: Race Leadership and Black Workers at the Nadir,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 7, 3 (Fall 2010): 79–93.

3. Herbert G. Gutman, “The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America,” in Julius Jacobson, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1968), 49–127; Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865–1890* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 163; Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 18; Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism, 1892–1923* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 112–113; Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904–54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Roger Horowitz, “Negro and White, Unite and Fight!” *A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930–90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Daniel L. Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Peter Linebaugh & Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coal Fields, 1908–1921* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Rosemary

American historians have shown little interest in the subject of interracial movements, and many have tended to minimize class distinctions within African American communities. Much academic scholarship, as well as popular essays produced by mostly liberal writers with the capacity to reach large readerships, has tended to focus on race and racism while marginalizing – or overlooking altogether – working-class struggles and class divisions within Black communities.⁴ We cannot ignore the immense influence several non-historians have had on the public's understanding of the histories of race and racism.

Given the mainstream approval of writings produced by liberal intellectuals ostensibly uncomfortable with the topic of class analysis, labour historians and leftists have legitimate reasons to feel defensive. Consider the often dismissive, frequently wrong-headed, and sometimes hostile approach to questions related to class by influential writers such as author and columnist Ta-Nehisi Coates

Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 32–33, 146–148; Lisa Phillips, *A Renegade Union: Interracial Organizing and Labor Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Staughton Lynd, *Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Clifford Farrington, *Biracial Unions on Galveston's Waterfront, 1865–1925* (Austin: Texas Historical Association, 2007); Robert H. Woodrum, *Everybody Was Black Down There: Race and Industrial Change in the Alabama Coalfields* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Stephen Brier, “R.L. Davis on Interracial Unionism: An 1886 Letter,” *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 5 (Summer 2008): 7–12; Mark A. Lause, *Race and Radicalism in the Union Army* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Victoria Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); David M. Struthers, *The World in a City: Multiethnic Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Jenny Carson, *A Matter of Moral Justice: Black Women Laundry Workers and the Fight for Justice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021); Elizabeth E. Sine, *Rebel Imaginaries: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Depression-Era California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Thomas Alter II, *Toward a Cooperative Commonwealth: The Transplanted Roots of Farmer-Labor Radicalism in Texas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022), 92.

4. There are plenty of important exceptions. For a small sampling, see Judith Stein, “‘Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others’: The Political Economy of Racism in the United States,” *Science & Society* 38, 4 (1974): 422–463; Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 307; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 112; Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 148–149; Adolph Reed Jr., *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000); Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power*; Clarence Lang, “Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest, and the Border South in the Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of Social History* 47, 2 (Winter 2013): 38; Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America's Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 198–206; Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 75–106.

and journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones. Writing in the widely circulated *Atlantic* in October 2017, Coates made the unsupported statement that white workers “have historically been the agents and beneficiaries of” racism.⁵ Any honest assessment of the nation’s racist segregation laws unquestionably reveals that they were passed by wealthy politicians and upheld by unaccountable judges. Importantly, Coates – who believes that large sections of the (white) left have devoted more attention to advocating class and workplace-based struggles than to efforts to dismantle instances of racial inequality – wrote this *after* the spectacular outbreaks of multiracial Black Lives Matter protests, which emerged in cities around the world in the wake of high-profile police killings of African Americans. Such mobilizations, driven by thousands of justifiably enraged people of all races in small and large communities alike, have continued to grow in recent times.

The enormous popularity of the *New York Times*–sponsored 1619 Project has given labour historians additional reasons to feel slighted. Edited by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, the collection of essays and poems about slavery’s profound legacy on African Americans in the United States, first published in magazine form in 2019, has been adapted into a bestselling book. The collection of essays in book form, written by professional academics, places race at the centre of the story of US history. For labour historians, the 2021 book’s most relevant chapter, entitled “Capitalism,” by Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, essentially portrays labour unions as racist organizations driven to advance white interests at the expense of African Americans. It is, of course, correct to say that, historically, many unions practised racially exclusionary policies, but there is also much evidence demonstrating that workers united across racial lines. Desmond suggests that the few “biracial coalitions” that did emerge “were exceptions,” and that such alliances “sprang up spontaneously.” Here he fails to acknowledge the dogged efforts of racially progressive Black and white unionists from at least the late-19th century to the present; a large and growing body of scholarship about interracial unionism illustrates that organizing work was exceedingly difficult, often dangerous, and time consuming, and thus hardly “spontaneous.”⁶ Given Desmond’s inexcusable omissions, we must conclude that he suffers from a myopic vision, one that is entirely compatible with the race relations framework aggressively pushed by large sections of academia’s upper-middle-class liberal intelligentsia. To be fair, Desmond is aware of the divide-and-conquer roles traditionally played by employers and even acknowledges Black leader Booker T. Washington’s

5. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The First White President: The Foundation of Donald Trump’s Presidency Is the Negation of Barack Obama’s Legacy,” *The Atlantic*, October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>

6. Matthew Desmond, “Capitalism,” in Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman & Jake Silverstein, eds., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021), 185.

anti-unionism, but he nevertheless believes that (white) unions – he omits Black labour organizations – were hopelessly racist, writing that “white workers chose poverty” over building multiracial organizations.⁷

Other contributors make passing references to Black labour struggles but say little, if anything, about the unions that African Americans joined and helped to lead. Historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad, for instance, devotes some space to the infamous and bloody 1887 Thibodaux, Louisiana, strike and massacre but fails to mention that the Knights of Labor organized it, or that the mostly Black action involved a good-sized number of white protestors.⁸ In fact, labour organizations that united Blacks and whites (though imperfectly) – including the Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, the United Mine Workers, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations – are absent from this hyped and factually challenged book.

Thankfully, North American labour historians have nevertheless persevered under this increasingly unfriendly climate, showing no inclination to abandon the study of the various ways racial and class divisions have moulded the lives, goals, limitations, and possibilities of African American workers.⁹ In 2022, no one can honestly fault labour scholars for failing to tackle what historian Ruth A. Frager referred to in 1999 as “the different ways in which class, ethnic, and gender hierarchies have intersected in specific historical circumstances.”¹⁰ The three books under review demonstrate the enduring relevance of studying African American history within proper political-economic contexts without losing sight of class divisions and conflicts. By taking these dimensions seriously, we can avoid what one of the authors under review scornfully calls the problem of “race reductionism.” Two of the studies are traditional historical accounts; the third is a somewhat polemical account designed to influence the direction of contemporary politics. Taken together, they illustrate much, including the nature of business exploitation, reactionary and liberal race-based policies in modern history, and the various conflicts, defeats, and triumphs experienced by Black workers. Politically, these scholars acknowledge the inescapable relationships between capitalism and class struggles, though none boldly calls for the destruction of this profoundly unfair, oppressive, and exploitative economic system.

7. Desmond, 183.

8. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, “Sugar,” in Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *1619 Project*, 85.

9. For a good reminder, see the following two very fine essay collections: Bruce E. Baker & Brian Kelly, eds., *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Reconstruction* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2013); Matthew Hild & Keri Leigh Merrit, eds., *Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018).

10. Ruth A. Frager, “Labour History and the Interlocking Hierarchies of Class, Ethnicity and Gender: A Canadian Perspective,” *International Review of Social History* 44, 2 (August 1999): 245. For one especially excellent example, see Joan Sangster, *Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Post-war Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 53–75.

Few historians have taught us more about African American labour history than Joe William Trotter Jr. His 2019 book, *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, is an extensive account of the intersections of race and class from the colonial period to recent times that builds on decades of cutting-edge scholarship. Trotter appears to have read and absorbed most of the relevant secondary sources published in the last few decades, offering valuable descriptions of the struggles of free and unfree labourers over the course of centuries. We learn much about racist forms of repression as well as the creative expressions of resistance that Black workers practised in agricultural, domestic, and manufacturing settings. Trotter is as adept at presenting the brutal characteristics of slavery and inspiring examples of slave uprisings in the 18th- and early-19th centuries as he is in outlining the confrontational skirmishes of Black workers on picket lines throughout the 20th century. He has produced *the* go-to book for those seeking a general account of the history of Black workers in the United States. In fact, even some of 1619 Project contributors cite *Workers on Arrival*.

Trotter's two-part book moves chronologically and packs in much, though he devotes considerably more space to modern times than to the years before the Civil War. Roughly 70 pages describe events in the pre-20th century period; the bulk of the volume covers the last twelve decades. This should not surprise us, given that the author is a seasoned expert of 20th-century African American labour history with multiple solid publications under his belt.¹¹ Yet the relatively short first section, which covers the experiences of the first Black workers, may strike some as odd considering the book's title.

Trotter's command of early periods is nevertheless remarkable. Importantly, he departs from others partially because of his emphasis on class divisions within communities of African Americans, proving that Blackness alone did not define the experience of African American labourers from the colonial period to the antebellum years. We discover, for example, that a small number of highly privileged African Americans owned slaves in the late 18th- and early-19th centuries, and that some free Blacks even helped to maintain systems of labour exploitation before slavery's collapse. "In this system," Trotter writes, "the most well-to-do free blacks not only became slaveowners themselves but also allied with white slaveowners to discourage and even help to squash slave rebellions" (11). In 1811, free Blacks in New Orleans helped to quash one of the biggest US slave revolts of that century (44–45). Clearly, not all African Americans shared the same interests – a point that Hannah-Jones and her collaborators show very little interest in exploring.

11. Joe W. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–32* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). In 2022, Trotter released another book: *African Americans Workers and the Appalachian Coal Industry* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2022).

Most faced exhausting, highly oppressive, and often terrifying experiences. Under constant pressure from lash-wielding overseers and an antagonistic legal landscape, African Americans developed a series of creative ways to cope with contemptible enslavers and their multiple enablers throughout the antebellum period. They ran away, physically assaulted their “masters,” and staged rebellions, and many received help from free Blacks and abolitionists of all races. Black-led actions during the Civil War constituted the unmistakable climax of decades of resistance, and Trotter echoes W.E.B. Du Bois in calling their courageous actions “a general strike.” These unprecedentedly massive strike waves marked the most extraordinary step in their efforts to free themselves and seek vengeance against their oppressors. For many, depriving their former masters of the labour power necessary to run plantations alone was an insufficient penalty, and Trotter informs us that numerous former slaves “swelled the ranks of the Union forces as fugitives, refugees, labor ‘contraband,’ and eventually soldiers” (49).

The post-Civil War years were characterized by both high and low points, and Trotter provides a balanced approach to the late 1860s and 1870s. The enactment of the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution, as well as the federal *Civil Rights Acts* in 1866 and 1875, provided African Americans with political rights. The election of southern Blacks to positions of political power was another clear example of the Civil War’s revolutionary outcome. Yet many figures who ruled over the expansive plantations that dotted the landscape of the South in the antebellum period remained influential, determined to exploit labourers as harshly as they had before slavery’s destruction. Employers had plenty of help from the white supremacist Democratic Party, which enjoyed extralegal assistance from vigilantes, including the Ku Klux Klan.

Trotter explains that southern-born men were not the only headstrong thugs who ritualistically abused the newly emancipated free men and women. Northern investors, eager to capitalize on postwar financial opportunities and maximize profits, purchased plantations and established businesses throughout the South. Transplanted northern capitalists showed a capacity for brutality that sometimes mirrored the merciless actions exhibited by their former southern foes; some applied the whip against defiant former slaves and profited from the spread of vagrancy laws, which punished idleness and thus ensured that employers enjoyed access to steady labour supplies. Importantly, federal officials tasked with “protecting” freedmen’s rights played critical roles in helping employers secure labourers. The federal government made clear that it was most committed to helping those who returned to jobs on farms, plantations, and homes. O.O. Howard, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, made this point unambiguously, insisting that any person “who can work has no right to support by the government” (56). Perhaps it is somewhat ironic that Klansmen and Freedmen bureau administrators, though ruthless adversaries with respect to most issues, shared an underlying belief that African

Americans needed to acknowledge their subservient status by prioritizing labour over all other activities.¹² Historian James Schmidt stated it best: they were “free to work.”¹³

Trotter does an excellent job in revealing that African American workers, like all labourers, sought greater dignity in the years after slavery's downfall. Indeed, those tied to a diversity of industries harboured grievances both in and outside of the Deep South. They looked to one another for help while joining existing unions and forming new ones. The early culmination of such activities occurred in Washington, DC, in December 1869, when Black labourers, hailing from eighteen states, established the Colored National Labor Union, which made several demands, including “the opportunity to work and to rise” (67). Meanwhile, both organized and unorganized Black workers, including female domestic labourers, resisted abusive bosses and fought for decent conditions by employing strikes and launching individual acts of sabotage.

On some occasions, Black and white workers joined to challenge their bosses. Trotter deserves credit for pointing to cases in the late-19th century, when the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers brought whites and Blacks together in mutually respectful ways. Importantly, some of the finest examples of interracial unity broke out in southern regions, including in the mine areas near Birmingham and on the docks of New Orleans in the 1890s just as Jim Crow segregation laws emerged. Trotter credits more radical unions, including the Industrial Workers of the World, for continuing traditions of interracial unity in the early-20th century.

Not surprisingly, racism crossed class lines, and plenty of white workers, Trotter acknowledges, harboured their own racist ideas and collectively practised various forms of discrimination. In dramatic cases, white workers staged strikes after employers hired African Americans. Trotter highlights a case in Atlanta, where over 1,000 white men and women walked off the job at the Fulton Bag and Cotton textile company after it began employing a dozen Black women as bag folders in 1897. After four days of protests, the company submitted to the workers' demand and discharged the Black women, which the protesting workers celebrated: “The white working men of Atlanta lauded the striking women as heroes and placed them at the front of the annual Labor Day parade in September” (64).

12. Sometimes Confederate veterans sought help from the Freedmen's Bureau. In 1866, Nathan Bedford Forrest, soon to be the Grand Wizard of the KKK, contacted Commissioner O. O. Howard because he wanted to secure “1000 able bodied negro laborers” to help him build a railroad in Memphis. Quoted in Joseph P. Reidy, *Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 344.

13. James D. Schmidt, *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815–1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

While white workers were periodically able to shape managerial decision-making, they generally had far less power than their employers. Recognizing the value of the almost timeless divide-and-conquer technique, Trotter notes that employers often took advantage of lingering racial tensions throughout the South, recognizing the profitability of employing Black labourers as strike-breakers. At the turn of the century, northern-based employers – who were direct beneficiaries of southern Jim Crow conditions – eagerly opened their doors to those who sought to escape landscapes of terrorism. Impacted by strikes organized by white workers, employers coordinated with southern-based labour recruiters. The strikebreaking process often started in southern regions and ended in riotous confrontations in places like Chicago, New York, and Pittsburgh, where Black job-seekers crossed perilous picket lines in search of meat-packing, longshore, and steel jobs. Importing strikebreakers, who were carefully guarded by police forces and private guards, produced further tensions and sometimes bloodshed.

Trotter's book reveals instances in which racism was generated from below and from above. But we must ask the fundamental question: on balance, which side, labour or management, has been more influential in shaping race relations within labour movements? Unfortunately, Trotter demonstrates little interest in weighing in on this decades-long, though far from resolved, debate. Yet he insists that we avoid the tendency to romanticize examples of interracial unity, maintaining that such instances were rare in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. As he puts it, "interracial labor organizing largely foundered on the shoals of racial conflict before the interwar rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations" (69).

This comment is both obvious and imprecise. No honest observer disputes that "racial conflict" profoundly hindered the labour movement throughout the late-19th and early-20th centuries, but historians must carefully identify the primary forces behind such conflicts. Historians have debated these questions for decades, and some have insisted that employers played *the* vital part in weakening labour movements by employing classic divide-and-rule strategies. Others, including those influenced by "whiteness studies," have claimed that white workers were utterly racist and thus played a critical role in undermining working-class unity across racial lines. Trotter offers useful anecdotes of both types but does not appear to prioritize one over the other.

While Trotter does not confront this important question explicitly, he does – unlike liberal darlings Coates and Hannah-Jones – approach issues concerning class divisions within African American communities with the attention that they deserve. Indeed, those most wedded to race relations frameworks have been ill equipped to properly describe the deradicalizing roles played by Black elites – many of whom were based in churches, higher educational establishments, and official politics – in denouncing movements against instances of police terrorism and employer exploitation. Of course, historically, plenty

of African Americans have embraced the politics of “law and order,” avoided unions, and condemned strikes while showing sympathy for those who profited from class-based exploitation and violence.¹⁴ Like members of all races, some were upwardly mobile company men and women, and a few self-appointed race leaders sought to promote Black business interests and the politics of respectability. The formation of the National Negro Business League in 1900 is one obvious example of this phenomenon. Meanwhile, middle-class Black women took the lead in organizing genteel organizations like the National League for the Protection of Colored Women. Organizations like this, and other promoters of “respectability,” targeted underprivileged and working-class Black women, insisting that they engage in activities that encouraged “uplift.” Together, middle-class and upper-middle-class African Americans maintained that all Blacks, irrespective of class position, embrace the politics of respectability.

Trotter provides much evidence revealing that the “respectable,” anti-radical “race leaders” were incapable of preventing outbreaks of combative organizing, despite various attempts to do so. Black labour and socialist activists demonstrated a firm grasp of the various ways cunning capitalists used racism to their advantage, which was particularly apparent in the era of World War I. Trotter describes the lives and struggles of some of the key figures, including Cyril Briggs, Herbert Harrison, Chandler Owen, and A. Philip Randolph. We learn about the important roles played by the Socialist Party in Harlem, where activists launched *The Messenger* in 1917. These well-read, rightfully outraged, and class- and race-conscious activists followed international events closely, identifying how capitalist-generated wars significantly harmed the interests of the working-class masses. For this reason, they strongly opposed World War I, supported the Russian Revolution’s triumphs, and helped raise class consciousness among readers.¹⁵

In the best tradition of the not-new-anymore new labour history, Trotter is as interested in the plights of his subjects outside of the workplace as he is with investigating their daily activities at work sites. He provides numerous examples of the types of subtle and overt forms of racism that African Americans experienced, describing poor living conditions, difficulties accessing decent health care, and intermittent encounters with thuggish police officers and racist vigilantes like the Ku Klux Klan. The second Klan, with a wider geographical footprint than its Reconstruction-era incarnation, intimidated and assaulted many Blacks who had migrated to northern regions during World War I. Rioting white terrorists constituted the most extreme expressions of

14. On Black elites’ support for “law and order,” see James Forman Jr., *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017).

15. On support for the Russian Revolution, see Winston James, “To the East Turn: The Russian Revolution and the Black Radical Imagination in the United States, 1917–1924,” *American Historical Review* 126, 3 (September 2021): 1001–1045.

racism during this period. In 1917, Chicago's hate-filled rioters enjoyed the backing of the police, "who openly supported mob attacks on the black community and added to the number of deaths, injuries, and loss of property" (108).

Instances of vandalism and carnage, dreadful examples of intimidation, and institutional forms of white supremacy sparked new waves of innovative forms of resistance in the 1930s. Black workers have long shown a willingness to stage strikes, boycotts, and protests at various points in the 20th century, and Trotter offers an excellent introduction to some of the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns that took off in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, in the late 1930s. These campaigns, often supported by sections of organized labour, forced department stores like Blumenstein's in New York and the grocery chain A&P to hire and promote African Americans.

Trotter connects the inspiring and often successful "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns to the famous March on Washington Movement in early 1941, just before the United States entered World War II. Some of the same individuals and organizations that had launched aggressive pressure drives on department stores continued their battles, demanding that the Roosevelt administration open military industry jobs to African Americans. Led by Randolph, the movement held regular meetings, debated issues, and put out a paper, *The Black Worker*, which called for "the integration of Negroes in the armed forces" (135). Roosevelt's administration quickly responded to the escalating pressures, demanding that Randolph call off the protest, which he did. The outcome: Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 prohibiting discrimination in war-related workplaces and his administration oversaw the creation of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, which was meant to assist minorities in obtaining these jobs.

But we must ask, was this gain enough? What else, if anything, could a disruptive March on Washington Movement have achieved by mobilizing activists to protest at the White House? Also, should we consider Randolph's decision to collaborate with liberal establishment figures like Eleanor Roosevelt and Fiorello LaGuardia as signs of weakness and co-optation? Trotter does not explore these important questions, nor does he examine the sharp critiques of Randolph by prominent voices to his left. Consider, for example, Black radical C.L.R. James' analysis of what he considered an extraordinary betrayal, writing that Randolph was a "traitor" who "did [Franklin] Roosevelt's dirty work."¹⁶ Roosevelt was, in James' judgment, little more than a shallow representative, an ally of Jim Crow politicians, and a faithful tool of the ruling class who disdained movements he could not control. James was exceptionally clear about

16. C. L. R. James, "The Negro's Fight: Negroes, We Can Depend Only on Ourselves!," in John Asimakopoulous & Richard Gilman-Opalsky, eds., *Against Capital in the Twenty-First Century: A Reader of Radical Undercurrents* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 114.

the interests of those at the top of society: "What the ruling class hates above all is independent mass action."¹⁷

James, whom Trotter unfortunately ignores in his study, was correct about the ruling class' desires and intentions. And members of it, with crucial assistance from politicians representing both parties, the FBI, police departments, and Black and white infiltrators, sought to dull the civil rights movement's militant edges and neutralize its most combative activists in the years after World War II. They were only partially successful. This movement, which led to significant legislative triumphs like the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and *Voting Rights Act of 1965*, was propelled primarily by the righteous fury of the Black working classes. The movement did not stop with these victories, and Trotter reminds us of Martin Luther King's unbroken, class-based activism, which included calls for launching a multiracial poor people's campaign and marching with striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968. Such actions coincided with the growth and influence of the Black Power movement, which found its strongest expression in the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Black Power also influenced rank-and-file autoworkers, and Trotter devotes space to the Detroit-based radicals behind the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, a rebellious campaign that challenged both the automobile executives and the United Auto Workers Union's increasingly unaccountable leadership. Trotter's point about the movement's class characteristics during the second part of the 1960s is spot-on: "Even more than the earlier phase of the Modern Black Freedom struggles, the Black Power movement was deeply anchored in poor and working-class black urban communities" (154). This is a significant and often overlooked observation: we cannot discuss the 20th century's most influential social movements without taking seriously the rage, consciousness-raising activities, sacrifices, risks, and organizational accomplishments of the Black working classes.

Despite the successes of militant protests, Black workers faced a new set of obstacles as the postwar boom ended in the early 1970s. In addition to police harassment and repression, many experienced the devastating losses of heavy manufacturing jobs in Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere. These developments led to increased joblessness, weakened unions, and the rise of more precarious forms of service-sector jobs. Trotter does a fine job of describing what to labour historians is an all-too-familiar story. The economic wreckage was not restricted to the urban north; Trotter notes the loss of over 500,000 mostly southern textile jobs between 1980 and 1994. This industry had historically discriminated against African Americans, though many jobs had opened up because of the reforms generated by the civil rights movement.

The book's final sections are some of the strongest. Here Trotter emphasizes enduring class divisions over a variety of issues related to work and culture.

17. James, 115.

He observes the emergence of Black mayors in the 1970s and 1980s. Supported by coalitions that had fought in the civil rights movement, Black activists expected much from these leaders whom they had helped elect. Yet once in positions of power, some practised regressive governance policies that differed little from the actions of white policymakers. One of the most notorious figures was Maynard Jackson, the corporate-controlled Black mayor of Atlanta. In response to a strike of mostly Black sanitation workers in 1977, Jackson fired hundreds and, in the process, demonstrated his class loyalties clearly and thus alienated large sections of the city's working class. Trotter has unearthed a particularly telling quotation that confirms Jackson's understanding of power dynamics: "I don't need you guys [Atlanta Chamber of Commerce] to get elected ... but I've learned that I certainly need you to govern" (174).

While Maynard Jackson had infuriated sizable sections of Atlanta's working classes in the late 1970s, several high-profile Black leaders repeatedly annoyed young Black people in the 1980s over questions about popular culture. For example, civil rights movement veteran and two-time presidential candidate Jesse Jackson succeeded in getting the US Congress to examine the lyrical content of rap songs, provoking a backlash from younger generations and illustrating what Trotter calls "new forms of intraracial class conflict" (164).

Trotter concludes his study with a discussion of the electoral victory of the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, and the more recent rise of the massively popular Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality. He describes the role social media played in both Obama's electoral triumph and the growth of the Movement for Black Lives. Regrettably, Trotter says little about Obama's refusals to address the basic needs of ordinary Americans or his consistently pro-corporate policies, though he does note "the increasing incidents of police brutality" during the 44th president's tenure (182). Unfortunately, liberal academics have, for the most part, failed to truthfully confront Obama's indefensible legacy – one shaped by rising class inequality, massive numbers of immigrant deportations, merciless drone bombings of innocent people in Pakistan and Yemen, and a repeated tendency to protect members of the United States' contemptible ruling class. And we saw a further erosion of labour union density under Obama even though he campaigned on a promise to make organizing easier. Obama's presidency was, to be fair, symbolically meaningful, but that is about it. He failed to improve the conditions of the working classes irrespective of race or ethnicity while promoting Wall Street's interests at practically every turn.

While Trotter offers an enormously valuable big-picture examination of Black working-class histories, historian Traci Parker has produced an equally impressive, though more narrowly focused, study about the various fraught relationships between Black workers and consumers in the context of American department stores. Parker's well-researched *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement: Workers, Consumers, and Civil Rights from the 1930s to the 1980s* complements the scholarship of a cohort of gender and labour

historians who have heightened our understandings of the intersectional divisions and battles in these highly contested spaces.¹⁸ Parker demonstrates the nature of the discriminatory employment and selling practices of numerous stores as well as the remarkable ways that African Americans and their allies fought back. They did so in many ways, including both direct protests – such as boycotts and walkouts – and legal actions. The results of consumer and labour campaigns were mixed, but Parker, like Trotter, demonstrates the significance of bottom-up organizing and agitational activities. Her book is notable for numerous reasons, including its challenge to those who have insisted that businesses, and not labour unions, constituted progressive forces against examples of racism.¹⁹

From the beginning, top managers at downtown department stores promoted what Parker calls “a white middle-class identity.” This meant, above all, that managers almost exclusively employed native-born white women as sales clerks. “Whiteness,” Parker insists, “became the most important requirement, trumping class and country of origin” (21). The supposed superiority of white identity was reinforced culturally, and Parker describes the pervasiveness of racist jokes in company newsletters as well as the popularity of department store–organized blackface minstrel performances, which continued to entertain employees well into the 1960s. Importantly, this culture of whiteness was imposed from above, though also widely embraced by workforces.

While department store managers were generally disinclined to hire Blacks as sales clerks, they did employ them as elevator operators, janitors, cooks, and shipping and receiving employees. Stores generally paid lower wages for these jobs than what they compensated white salespeople. Those who took these positions generally interacted very little with consumers, and their jobs were usually segregated from white employees. At the same time, these were often stable positions that provided better income and dignity than other forms of employment, including highly exploitive domestic labour.

Yet some African Americans did succeed in obtaining sales jobs in workplaces run by liberal-leaning paternalistic managers and owners. Some department store owners sought to hire African Americans for such positions

18. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Mara Keire, “Shouting Abuse, Harmless Jolly, and Promiscuous Flattery: Considering the Contours of Sexual Harassment at Macy’s Department Store, 1910–1915,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 19, 1 (March 2022): 52–73.

19. For a book that declares “that corporations have been a real and powerful force for racial progress in the United States,” see Jennifer Delton, *Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 282. Compare Delton with Nancy MacLean, who wrote in 2006 that “business organizations fought hard against civil rights measures.” MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

because of what Parker calls “humanitarian sentiments” (35). Sears, Roebuck, and Company’s Julius Rosenwald, for example, was friendly with famous Black leader Booker T. Washington, and Rosenwald appreciated Washington’s conservative economic philosophies, which encouraged African Americans to display unconditional deference to employers and those in positions of power. Yet even Rosenwald was unable to convince Sears’ board of directors to hire more than a few Black job-seekers for sales jobs.

Parker provides much evidence demonstrating the different ways store owners and their managers discriminated against Black consumers. Some prevented them from entering during certain hours, and others established and maintained segregated areas for African American shoppers. Some managers allowed domestic labourers to shop on behalf of their employers but prohibited them from purchasing items for themselves. Chicago’s retail mogul, Marshall Field’s, even demanded that its salespeople respond to Black shoppers with “indifference” on the store’s main floors. Field’s instructed employees to direct them to the bargain basements, where there was a greater availability of cheaper goods and where they were less likely to rub shoulders with white customers.

Intensifying accumulations of racist slights and discriminatory policies led to a series of labour and consumer activist campaigns. Coinciding with labour activism elsewhere, militant protests against department stores emerged in the 1930s, and Parker offers one of the most engaging accounts of the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns available. An especially high-profile campaign took place at Kaufman’s in Washington, DC. Annoyed by the activism sparked by such groups as the New Negro Alliance (NNA), the Young People’s Socialist League, and the League for Industrial Democracy, Harry Kaufman sought protection from the court system, which granted him a permanent injunction in January 1934. Importantly, Parker gives needed attention to the significance of multiracial labour-left forces in confronting racist workplace autocrats like Kaufman.

Few organizations were more important than the NNA. Its picketing and legal pursuits on behalf of racial justice at Kaufman’s ultimately led to a significant victory: *New Negro Alliance v Sanitary Grocery Co.*, the 1938 US Supreme Court decision that desegregated stores. Reluctantly, Kaufman’s and other DC-based retail outlets began hiring African Americans as sales clerks. Parker delivers a clear message: persistent protests organized across racial lines led to meaningful results.

The 1938 decision inspired activists in other regions, Parker illustrates, including Brooklyn and Harlem. In Harlem, the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment, formed by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and William Imes, built a broad, cross-class coalition of more than 200 groups and involving 170,000 participants. Harlem’s campaign led to the hiring of African Americans in large companies such as A&P and the New York Telephone Company as well as “every large store on 125th Street” (70).

Capitalizing on the democratic language used by spokespersons during World War II, African Americans continued to assert pressure, ultimately securing meaningful wins in the early 1940s. In Manhattan, the United Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Employees' Union succeeded in compelling Macy's, Bloomingdales, and others to employ Black workers in white-collar jobs in 1942. Activists achieved similar victories in Boston, where department stores Gilchrist and Jordan Marsh succumbed to pressure from the Massachusetts Governor's Committee for Racial and Religious Understanding and the Urban League.

Historians have long told us that boycotts and picketing by activists demanding consumer rights took centre stage during the height of the civil rights movement. Parker adds considerable depth to this topic. While many are aware of the famous 1960 Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, fewer are likely as familiar with similar direct-action campaigns elsewhere. Eight years before African American college students forced the Greensboro store to desegregate, a coalition of over 100 church, community, and labour groups, organized collectively as the Coordinating Committee for the Enforcement of DC Anti-Discrimination Laws (CCEAD), forced the DC-based Hecht's to open its lunch counter to customers irrespective of race.

Stunning victories in Washington, DC, in Greensboro, and elsewhere heartened tens of thousands of observers, sparking additional protests in regions throughout the nation where activists demanded rights "on behalf of black customers *and* workers" (149). Campaign results were mixed. Annoyingly, Hecht's, in response to economic pressure, welcomed Black customers but stubbornly refused to hire enough African American employees for what Parker calls "positions of responsibility" (154). More than a decade later, protestors organized by groups like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) held pickets in front of its Arlington, Virginia, and downtown DC locations because of lingering bigotry. In response to what might have become an unrelenting, decades-long campaign, the Hecht Company's management finally capitulated, deciding to meet with CORE activists in March 1964, when it promised to "increase the opportunities for Negroes by a considerable measure" (165).

Similar aggressive campaigns in other places led to additional triumphs. Such victories coincided with the high tide of the civil rights movement. Parker explains the significance of the sit-in movement in Charlotte, North Carolina. Despite its reputation for "racial moderation" in the early 1960s, she points out, "the city was far from integrated" (168). Indeed, one should not take the words of its urban boosters at face value given the sustained campaigns of consumer activists. And these campaigns enjoyed relatively extensive support, including from liberal-minded white churchgoers. The months-long campaigns succeeded in Charlotte, and on 9 July 1960 more than a dozen Black students were served at seven separate lunch counters in the city.

Parker, reinforcing the insights of other scholars, notes that activists had adopted more militant tactics by the end of the 1960s. Continued frustrations

generated by daily snubs, lasting poverty, and continuous police harassment led to a series of aggressive riots at decade's end. Here, too, Parker provides refreshing insights. She revisits the night of Martin Luther King's assassination, when furious protestors demonstrated in cities around the nation. During the four days of rioting in Washington, DC, for example, participants targeted stores that had long discriminated against African Americans, including Hecht's. At the same time, residents "left untouched commercial establishments with which they were unfamiliar, those that had instituted fair employment and customer service policies, and businesses that advertised their grief over the loss of King" (183).

These tumultuous uprisings contributed to what historians, sociologists, and policymakers have called the "urban crisis." Media portrayals of enraged and unruly Black youth generated considerable fear in white middle-class communities, prompting white people to avoid what Parker calls "dangerous havens of so-called undesirables" (185). In response, significant numbers of white residents continued their years-long practice of departing the urban centres. Retail outlets followed them to the suburbs, leading to the widespread growth of shopping malls. These were located far from urban centres, which represented an additional challenge to African American shoppers, workers, and job-seekers. Large numbers of suburbanites, committed to maintaining racially exclusive neighbourhoods, opposed public transportation that could have transported urban-based employees and customers to malls. Moreover, mall managers prohibited protests in their facilities, and mall cops aggressively monitored and harassed shoppers, including disproportionate numbers of African Americans. The spread of the malls offered powerful racists new opportunities to promote segregation and harassment, including, as Parker explains, "persuading public transportation agencies not to service the mall with bus routes from Black neighborhoods, surveilling African American shoppers and making them uneasy, and having police follow black motorists" (235).

The rise of big, largely suburban, discount retail outlets represented another stage in this history. It is a dismal tale, involving ruthless cost-cutters who share some responsibility for contributing to rising financial precarity and further decline in union density levels. Overbearing managers constituted the most visible source of the problem. In the 1960s and 1970s, Parker points out, Kmart established internal security departments with the aim of monitoring potential union activity among its employees. Of course, today's giant retailers like Walmart and Target have followed in this tradition, remaining entirely union-free in the United States.

Such employers had learned about the power of labour and consumer organizing. Indeed, Parker's rich history is an important reminder of the labour movement's importance in organizing across racial lines to help both workers and shoppers achieve their goals in the context of employer bigotry and stubbornness. Her detailed stories of struggles across time and space fit in

comfortably with the historiography of the “long civil rights movement,” a scholarly tradition that has spotlighted the ways civil and labour struggles complement each other.²⁰ These movements, she writes, “may have been beholden to liberal attitudes and managerial initiatives, but they owed their strength and effectiveness to black protests to forcefully end racial discrimination and segregation in employment and consumption in northern and western cities” (82).

While Trotter and Parker present traditional academic histories about the activities of labour and consumer activists, historian Touré Reed has produced a short, mostly well-reasoned polemical account about what he argues has and has not worked in Black politics. *Toward Freedom: The Case against Race Reductionism* maintains that the best way to achieve a fundamentally better society for the African American masses is found in policies that directly address the needs of the working-class majority, which Reed calls the “public interest model of government” (18). Rather than organize around “race reductionist” demands like slave reparations or push for the election of more Black leaders, the African American masses, in his view, must join with working-class people of all races and demand political-economic improvements designed to improve the conditions of the majority. In making this case, he finds much inspiration in the New Deal, which, according to the conventional wisdom with which Reed agrees, constituted a set of largely effective, if imperfect, solutions to an unprecedented economic crisis. According to this perspective, the US federal government had proved that it was sincerely committed to protecting the welfare of ordinary people, and this large group, realizing that support, built durable labour unions that raised wages and provided greater economic security. African Americans were a core part of these labour-left and labour-liberal alliances. Labour historians are likely familiar with this type of reasoning. Indeed, we have been fighting an uphill battle for decades against an assortment of both conservatives and liberals who remain uncomfortable with any type of class analysis. Reed’s short book is, essentially, a persuasive critique of what he considers the dead end of identity politics.

Reed’s emphasis on the importance of returning to political-economic solutions cuts sharply against the grain of a long line of conservative and liberal ideas that he repeatedly labels “race reductionism.” He does an outstanding job of explaining, and critiquing, the ideas articulated by a handful of well-known figures past and present, including Ta-Nehisi Coates, Harvard historian Oscar Handlin, policymaker Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Wall Street-controlled politicians like Hillary Clinton and Obama. In Reed’s opinion, these figures have offered a string of wrong-headed policy ideas and have habitually shown an unwillingness to draw lessons from the histories of Black labour movements or the most progressive features of the New Deal.

20. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, 4 (March 2005): 1233–1263.

Reed's first chapter has a somewhat predictable "rise and fall" of the New Deal order feel to it. For decades, historians have used this model to explain the emergence of Roosevelt and the New Deal, the business-led backlashes to the order – including the establishment of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938 and the passage of the *Taft-Hartley Act* in 1947 – the civil rights movement's achievements, and then, finally, the rise of Ronald Reagan and the onslaught of multiple neoliberal cruelties in the 1980s. Reed reminds us of the ways that somewhat robust state programs had once helped to reduce capitalism's harshest features while providing social safety nets and dignity to ordinary Americans. Rather than view New Deal programs as undermining more radical alternatives and establishing social control under the command of authoritative policymakers and trade union bureaucrats, Reed maintains that such programs created "a legal framework, shaped by popular discontent over a decade of economic crisis, that legitimated citizens' demands on government for a more equitable and democratic society" (46). Reagan, whom Reed incorrectly refers to as "the nation's first neoliberal president" (one-term president and Democrat James Carter probably deserves that dishonourable distinction), marked an alarming turning point characterized by cuts in social programs, union-busting, and the excessive coddling of the business community.

Thankfully, Reed does not simply offer a top-down political history lesson, recognizing the labour movement's critical role in advancing Black interests throughout the mid-20th century. He joins Trotter and Parker in illustrating how actions from below impacted policies, noting that African Americans were important participants in the movements that erupted in or near the nation's coal mines, factories, and railroads. Reed mentions the important roles played by civil rights organizations in supporting the growth of groups like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s as well as this community's durable support for collective bargaining rights. CIO head John L. Lewis, for example, hired three African Americans from the National Negro Congress to organize midwestern steel workers in 1936. Around the same time, growing numbers of Black labour activists held membership in the Communist Party, which itself helped to build unions, organized hunger marches, and confronted landlords involved in evicting tenants. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the labour movement enjoyed, in Reed's words, "wide appeal" (40). That remained true after World War II. Perhaps the climactic moment was the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where protestors, led in part by King, made demands that reflected the goals of earlier activists.

Reed is nevertheless aware of the numerous critiques of the New Deal order, including that its labour-oriented policies excluded farm and domestic labourers, sizable numbers of whom were African Americans, from economic protections. More broadly, he understands "that New Deal liberalism" was "far removed from socialism." Furthermore, he acknowledges Roosevelt's

limitations during the World War II period, writing that he stifled “labor and civil rights militancy.” But he nevertheless gives a more-than-half-full interpretation of liberal politicians and policymakers during these years, saluting Roosevelt and his New Deal allies for advancing “a vision for a social corporatist democracy that sought to mitigate capitalism’s harshest implications for American citizens while alleviating the tensions between industrial capitalism and republican democracy” (3).

Subsequent chapters focus on the influences of policymakers and public intellectuals in shaping popular ideas about race and implanting policies. Such figures were guilty of, in short, separating race from political economy considerations. Reed is rightly critical of public intellectual Oscar Handlin and liberal-turned-neocon policy official Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Both sought to make sense of, and offer responses to, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Reed reminds us that Handlin, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian from Harvard, earned his reputation as a scholar of immigration who understood the world through an “ethnic pluralism” lens rather than a class-based one. His thinking, marred by near class blindness and a failure to take seriously the damaging impacts of deindustrialization, led to a series of inadequate assumptions, including the idea that racial inequality was first and foremost “a moral dilemma” (54). As Reed puts it, “Handlin’s commitment to identitarian rather than political-economic interpretative frameworks would lead him to a number of erroneous and often reactionary conclusions about the civil rights movement, the source of racial inequality, and white racism that would not only find striking corollaries in the Black Power movement but should sound familiar to readers today” (57).

Moynihan, the author of the highly influential 1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (a.k.a. the Moynihan Report), has an equally problematic history of putting forward misguided ideas that have ultimately failed to meaningfully help ordinary African Americans. One of the key figures in shaping the policies of President Lyndon Johnson, Moynihan, like Handlin, repeatedly overemphasized racial and ethnic divisions at the expense of political economy matters. His insights, flawed by his adoption of an “ethnic pluralism” framework, emerged at a time when deindustrialization and automation had begun to seriously weaken the position of the working classes, including many African Americans, who – as Trotter, Parker, and Reed all remind us – joined unions and supported organized labour more consistently than their white counterparts. Reed notes that Moynihan’s “emphasis on the cultural distinctiveness of poor blacks” shaped the view of generations of policymakers guilty of ignoring or downplaying political economy matters (86).

To my mind, Reed’s most satisfying chapter takes aim at former US president Barack Obama and the popular and overrated liberal writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. The cleverly titled “Obama and Coates: Postracialism’s and Post-Postracialism’s Yin-Yang Twins of Neoliberal Benign Neglect” is a true delight to read for those of us aggravated by the failure of our political leaders and

public intellectuals to engage with the most meaningful, class-based challenges that have adversely harmed the working class across racial lines. Obama won the support of large sections of organized labour during his two presidential campaigns but failed to promote policies that would have helped unions grow and strengthen. Like Handlin and Moynihan, Coates largely ignores questions about political economy in his writing and thus divorces race from class. Both, Reed maintains, “have taken up complementary roles as black emissaries of neoliberalism” (103).

Readers of *Labour/Le Travail* are most likely aware of Obama’s disastrous tenure in office, and Reed, who is thankfully far more critical than Trotter of the former president, highlights some of the former president’s most insufferable comments as well as his harmful agenda items: Obama’s unbearably moralizing speeches to young Black men, his failure to push for the *Employee Free Choice Act* (which would have made union organizing easier), and the passage of the conservative (un)Affordable Health Care Act. Reed puts it well: “Rather than advancing a progressive agenda targeting the working and middle classes, Obama’s economic vision – like Bill Clinton’s before him – dashed the hopes of many working people for earning more than pocket change” (127). Dashed indeed.

Coates, of course, has had far less of an impact than Obama. Yet his writings circulate widely, and the leaders of liberal institutions have gone out of their way to provide him with platforms, from which he reaches many college students and professors. His ideas, also found in centrist publications like the *Atlantic*, pose no significant threat to those in positions of power. “Both [Coates and Obama],” Reed writes, “abstract African American poverty from the economic and social policies that have, indeed, impacted blacks disproportionately – including the decline of the union movement and the retrenchment of the public sector – even if their impetuses often have little or nothing to do with race” (103). And while he has sometimes been critical of Obama, Coates has mostly given intellectual cover to the person Cornel West once artfully and accurately called “a black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs and a black puppet of corporate plutocrats.”²¹

Many labour historians will probably nod their heads in agreement while reading Reed’s penetrating takedowns of the obnoxious liberals responsible for souring the dialogue on far too many North American universities and beyond. But Reed himself could have extended his critiques further by questioning some of his own assumptions about earlier times when politicians supposedly took seriously the interests of the working classes. We must ask

21. Chris Hedges, “The Obama Deception: Why Cornel West Went Ballistic,” *Truthdig*, 16 May 2011, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-obama-deception-why-cornel-west-went-ballistic/>. Coates has criticized Obama for his overemphasis on demanding that African Americans take more personal responsibility in their lives. Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 1–2.

some questions. Should we view the New Deal order and the labour-liberal coalition that thrived during it as models worthy of imitation? Must we limit our goals to achieving a strong labour movement backed by a liberal state? Although Reed is aware of the period's shortcomings, he does not address the arguments advanced by the many scholar-activists who have critiqued liberalism from the left for its powerful co-optative, deradicalizing, and even union-busting roles. Late scholar-activists like C.L.R. James and Howard Zinn as well as current-day labour historians such as Christopher Tomlins, Michael Goldfield, Staughton Lynd, Bryan D. Palmer, and Ahmed White have taught us much about the pitfalls of placing trust in liberal politicians while exposing the clear shortcomings of New Deal reforms.²² These critical historians, whom Reed ignores, have taught us that while Roosevelt and fellow New Dealers often used pro-labour language and provided some protections against the most egregious employer abuses, their discomfort and sometimes repressiveness in response to militant labour uprisings and leftist organizing demonstrate that they were significantly more interested in maintaining order than in promoting working-class power. Today's liberal political historians, professionally invested in providing mostly praiseworthy interpretations of Democratic Party policymakers, are often silent about how New Dealers stood in the way of the more radical solutions that leftist activists in labour movements demanded. Sadly, these scholars are perfectly comfortable celebrating the liberal victories and state policies of the century's mid-decades while denouncing the rise and expansion of "neoliberalism" that came after it. But they are hesitant to condemn capitalism itself.

Nevertheless, these three books highlight the richness of Black labour history, coalitional movements, and leftist politics – and they deserve to be widely read and debated by historians and today's labour activists. The recent union victory at a massive Amazon distribution centre in New York City was secured partially because its Black-led movement formed reading groups that studied the inspiring histories of class struggles.²³ Labour history, in its broadest sense, rather than publications produced by careerist race relations writers, offered them practical guidance and political inspiration. These activists, and

22. Howard Zinn, *Postwar America, 1945–1971* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973); Christopher Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Staughton Lynd, ed., *"We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014); Ahmed White, *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Kay: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

23. Luis Feliz Leon, "Amazon Workers on Staten Island Clinch a Historic Victory," *Labor Notes*, 1 April 2022, <https://labornotes.org/2022/04/amazon-workers-staten-island-clinch-historic-victory>.

plenty of others, will benefit from reading these three books, since they serve as necessary reminders of the importance of taking the history of class divisions and struggle seriously. It is unlikely that Trotter, Parker, and Reed will make as much of an impact as the articles and books produced by our society's influential and increasingly intolerable Obama-loving liberal intellectuals. But as labour historians, we must continue to make the case for the enormous significance of African American scholarship that takes seriously the history of class divisions and conflicts. And perhaps some of the Amazon workers active in reading groups might feel inspired to liberate copies of these publications from warehouse shelves.