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GEORGE RAWICK

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**|** *George Rawick, 1930-1990*  
*In Memoriam*

*Midnight Notes*  
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"Racism and the Making of American Society" was first published as chapter nine in *From Sundown tdo Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Greenwood: Westport, Connecticut, 1972). "Working-Class Self-Activity" was first published in *Radical America*, volume 3, number 2 (March-April 1969).

## Introduction

Just four days after Nelson and Winnie Mandela visited us in Boston, George Rawick died in St. Louis (27 June 1990). He was our political comrade. We listened to him, we argued with him, we respected him. He was of our roots.

His grandfather was an immigrant socialist and orthodox rabbi who participated in the funerals of the victims of the Triangle Shirt fire. George attended high school in Brooklyn during a period, 1944-1947, of the largest work stoppage in 20th century U.S.A. ('man days' lost owing to strikes). Later at the end of the Fifties, George was involved in the founding of S.D.S. He visited C.L.R. James in London and became active in the Facing Reality group. What all this amounts to is a story of the American working class moving with characteristic velocity from socialism to Communism to Trotskyism, and then through that.

The last time we saw George was May Day 1986. That was the year of the general strike in South Africa. It was the centennial of the massacre at Haymarket in Chicago that had made May Day a

holiday of the working class in the first place. George spoke at UMass Boston and then aboard a harbor cruiser that sailed us down to Merrymount in Quincy where the first May Pole in north America was erected by Spanish, English, native American, and west African people in 1627. On that ship there was a lot of talk, and Brazilian music.

What George has to say we still need to hear. Youth need to accept that older folk possess information about the past, and older folks have to accept that youth possess information about the future. That's the spirit in which we republish two pieces by George: first, "Working-Class Self-Activity" and, second, "Racism and the Making of American Society," published in 1969 and 1972 respectively. Notice the dates. Those were the years of the second largest work stoppage in 20th century American history. These writings had an impact in northern Italy, industrial England, Jamaica, and Detroit. We want you to read them.

George taught that the essence of the working class is unpaid labor. When you think about it, you can see it includes a lot — slaves for instance, students for another example, and the invisible housework of women, even more to the point. A second premise he taught: the working class is always in

motion. Therefore, it never looks the same as it once did.

These were the lessons he needed to teach in 1969 to the New Left whose scorn of the Old Left was not misplaced. The Sixty-Eighters despised the union bureaucrats and party hacks who kept saying get a job, sha-di-da-da, sha-di-da-di-da. Yet the defeat of the New Left was inevitable as long as it lacked an understanding of the continuities among unpaid workers. The New Left had not fully grasped Rawick's first premise; just as the Old Left had not grasped the second.

George had to tell us that being a part of the working class was more than having a job and belonging to the trade union or the political party. The Third International of the Communist Party never understood the basis of pan-Africanism, nor the independent leadership of Black Power, so George understood why the black movement tended to regard any discussion of 'class' as tainted by the white race. Of course this still happens: the *Review of Radical Political Economics* (Vol. 2, No.4, p.145) writes as if the American working class was vanilla spread on white bread!

George's method is based upon dialectics. He explains this in the third footnote of the "Self-Activ-

ity" article. But there is more to it. It is the interplay between past and present and future; it is the priority of action over thought. He wasn't going to get lost in the past. Dialectics may be the most useful quality of this article, rather than any particular hypothesis. Yet, interpretation and dialectic are inseparable.

Consider his last sentence in "Self-Activity". It is a call to action. The new society is revealed in "workers' councils in every department of national activity," he writes. Why restrict the new society to the "nation"? Capitalism in 1969 was already reorganizing its production based on the global village. As for the expression, "workers' councils," it is old-fashioned going back to Kronstadt, Torino, and Berlin in 1919. But that's how he'd make us argue with him, with an outrageous demand for the future. How else can political work be done?

"Racism and the Making of American Society" is the last chapter of the first volume introducing his forty-volume series of narratives by former slaves, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. That work shows the massive African presence in and of north America. Every student, historian, novelist, and poet of Afro-America depends on these volumes because they contain nothing less than the words of the slaves. The first volume is called *From*

*Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972) because at night-time it was possible to steal away to prepare for the longest work stoppage in all of American history, what DuBois called the General Strike of 1863-1865.

The last chapter is brazen. Its goal is to explain three hundred years of American history. He wants to explain the various deals of American history, the Compacts, the Declarations of Independence, the Utopian communities. But the biggest deal ever cut is the racist deal. How does it stack up today? The white labor movement is looking at lower wages, more hours, fewer unions, crushed strikes. The strategic centers of Black Power, the cities, are faced with huge assaults upon the social wage; they are confronted by a cunning policy of spatial deconcentration; they are subject to a racist violence that combines drug addiction with police weaponry.

Rawick's starting point in understanding the U.S.A., like DuBois's, is the black working class. For that reason he puts the white labor movement in perspective. This is especially poignant for those of us in Boston who can take his comments about Thoreau, or Garrison, or Philips and translate them into today's terms. Compare, for instance, what George says about Thoreau at Walden Pond to the anti-nuke

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people or the Pledge of Resistance folks. Pacifism and Moralism have been possible for them only because of a certain relationship to the State that is not, and never was, possible for African-Americans. Indeed one should take Rawick's argument a step farther to show that the non-violence of one part of the U.S. movement depends upon the violence exercised against the Black working class. The prevalence of guns in U.S. cities indicates the confidence of the U.S. ruling class in the divisions which have been established in our class. It need not remain that way.

As we sailed to Merrymount George wanted to tell us all about Albert Parsons. He was one of the Haymarket martyrs. He was married to the more well-known Lucy Parsons, the Black and Indian woman who was a militant in the mid-West. What we didn't appreciate was that Albert was white and Texan, and that he had fought with the Confederacy. Afterwards he supported Black Power in Reconstruction. Then he joined the Eight Hour Movement in Chicago. See: George used his theory to expand working class possibilities, never to limit them. George even presents Abraham Lincoln as working on his own racism!

Some of what historians have learned from

George is presented in *Within the Shell of the Old: Essays on Workers' Self-Organization - A Salute to George Rawick*, edited by Don Fitz and David Roediger (Charles Kerr, 1990). Some of what we have learned from him is presented in our tenth issue of *Midnight Notes*, called *New Enclosures*. The forty volumes of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* is available at Boston College, UMass, Suffolk, Tufts, Harvard, and Brandeis Universities. The Library of Congress number is 79-12456.

Peter Linebaugh  
*Midnight Notes*



## Racism and the Making of American Society

AMERICA WAS BORN NEARLY FREE AND RACIST. CLASS division among whites and the sense of class were much less sharp than in Europe.<sup>1</sup> There was no extensive feudal aristocracy, although there was a degree of class privilege. There was a seemingly endless supply of land. In such a society, men could contract one with another voluntarily to construct a new society.

But almost from the beginning American Indians and blacks were permanently excluded from the social contract.<sup>2</sup> Race and ethnic consciousness was more evident than class consciousness. As long as that has been true, the promise of American life, the full promise of the Declaration of Independence of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," has been denied for both white and nonwhite.

Social contract in America has not been mere political theory. It has been popular experience. Men fight, debate, vote, and live by the decisions they make until circumstances demand changes. The ear-

lier contract is therefore revoked and a new one initiated.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Americans often resorted to the contract to found governments: the Mayflower Compact of 1620; the Plantation Agreement of Roger Williams and a group of religious dissenters in the wilderness of Rhode Island; the Charter Oath of Thomas Hooker and his followers who had moved from Massachusetts to what is now Connecticut; the Albany Union Plan of 1754; the Association document of 1774 in which the colonies joined together to form a Continental Congress; and the Declaration of Independence. White Americans voluntarily constructed a free government.

With the achievement of independence, the social contract took another, even more revolutionary, turn. It became the device for the expression of the direct democracy of the people. Wave after wave of settlers moved westward, establishing new municipalities and colonies by covenant. Bringing only what they could carry in their wagons and in their heads, they created a series of havens in the wilderness. When they grew tired or dissatisfied with what they had done, they picked themselves up and moved on to repeat the process elsewhere. And as they did this, they

exterminated American Indians, discriminated against Mexicans, and preserved slavery at least in those areas in which it already existed.

One of the extraordinary offshoots of the experience of actual social contract was the hundreds of utopian socialist colonies created in the early part of the nineteenth century. Although the best known of these was the Brook Farm Association of the American Transcendentalists, with which most of the outstanding intellectual and literary figures of the day were associated, the most successful was the founding by the Latter-Day Saints of the new Zion in the Utah wilderness of the salt flats near the Great Salt Lake. And while this was a movement in which all class distinctions were to be obliterated, with rich and poor alike eligible for sainthood, blacks were excluded.

As long as the voluntary social contract was continually renewed in a society of equals — a society in which most white men could realistically hope for the opportunity to pursue happiness and had a realistic chance of material success — the state played a minimal role in human affairs. Henry David Thoreau could go up on a hill above Concord after spending a night in jail for refusing to pay his church tax, declare that “the State was nowhere” to be seen and

do so without being hopelessly wrong.<sup>3</sup>

Yet while white people often did not feel the presence of the state, black people always did. It was present in the form of the patrollers, the local sheriffs, the operations of the Fugitive Slave Law, and potentially in every white person who might act to defend the laws that preserved slavery.

It was this difference of experience with the state that largely accounts for the conflict between white radical abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass. Garrison could simply declare himself against union with slaveholders, and thereby oppose political struggle against slavery. Douglass, on the other hand, was black. He knew of the operations of the state. Radical as he was, he never gave up political struggle. He created something of a scandal in the abolitionist movement when he arranged to pay his old master for his freedom. The Garrisonians saw this as an unprincipled acknowledgement of the morality of slavery; Douglass, the fugitive slave, saw it as a very practical way of resisting the operations of the Fugitive Slave Act, in which all citizens were obliged to aid in the capture of runaway slaves, even in the free states.

American society in the first part of the nineteenth century had been one in which property was



widely diffused and in which social mobility had been relatively easy. There was a rough egalitarianism of manners and customs, and there was neither the power of church nor state to oppress the individual. At the end of the eighteenth century, an overwhelming majority of Americans were outside of the organized churches, and very few felt the power of the state. On the frontier, the populace saw neither judge nor preachers, sheriff nor powerful entrepreneur, from almost one year to the next. There were some who were wealthier and more powerful than others, and there were those who were treated with contempt. But these social facts did not dominate reality, and there was a sense that each man had committed his destiny to the community in whose creation he had played a part.

And when that society was threatened by the extension of slavery, Lincoln said that his sole purpose was to maintain it as a free Union. This was not mere political rhetoric nor a simple method for evading the slavery issue as has often been charged. Lincoln was defending what he, along with the common people of America, believed to be the heart of the whole American experience — the social contract. When Lincoln referred to the Union as mankind's last, best hope, he was invoking the social experience of the

revolutionary generation and bringing it to bear against the claim of the South that a nation formed by the will of the people could be abruptly broken by a conspiracy of slave owners.

In order to preserve the essence of that Union, the society of free men, Lincoln could become a revolutionary and fight for the natural rights of men, which, after all, were what the social contract was to preserve. He could move to emancipate the slaves and use them in the military struggle. And there is little reason to believe that if he had lived, he would not have waged a struggle for a new birth of freedom for all men, black and white. Lincoln, the common man as democrat, had in the war itself begun to overcome his racism.

The Civil War brought with it a revolution in American life — the triumph of industrial capitalism and the ending of the society of rough equality. And while the common people opposed this, their struggle was defeated by their own racism. Despite the promise of the American life, the common American white man, the perpetual innocent, allowed the egalitarianism that had been present at the beginning to get out of his grasp. The solidarity of being white limited or destroyed the solidarity of being a factory worker, dirt farmer, or white-collar employee. American

reform movements, agrarian populism, and working-class movements were to be checked by racism.

This has been so not due simply to an ideology of racism, but to the reality that so long as there is a socially separated nonwhite population, there seems to be a way for whites to avoid being heavily represented in the pool of unskilled workers who are the unemployed in a society that in normal times always has a core of unemployed. In the past, whites have had reason to believe that they could avoid becoming part of a classic proletariat, although there was much illusion in their belief. While in fact the majority of the poor are usually white, blacks always are very overrepresented at the bottom of the American class structure. The belief that black workers can be made to carry a greater share of unemployment, underemployment, and low wages is based on a significant amount of concrete evidence.

But it is also true that whenever blacks have advanced in America, white workers as a class have moved forward. Karl Marx observed:

In the United States of America, every independent movement of workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate

itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation, that ran with seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1830s, when the first evidence of a modern industrial system in the United States appeared, the relationship between white and black workers had begun to be utilized to weaken the working class. Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave who became the leader of American blacks, understood this relationship and its consequence. He wrote:

The hostility between the whites and blacks is easily explained. It has its roots and sap in the relation of slavery and was incited on both sides by the cunning of the slave masters. These masters secured their ascendancy over the poor whites and the blacks by putting enmity between them. They divided both to conquer each.<sup>5</sup>

In the South, the poor whites were often denied

an opportunity to enter nonagricultural employment and at the same time were unable to become slave owners with large estates. On the other hand, poor whites found employment as members of the slave patrols to keep the blacks in line.

Some poor whites were pushed onto the poor land of the Appalachians, the clay soils of northern Louisiana, northern Alabama, and Arkansas, and onto marginal lands elsewhere in the South. Others left the South and migrated into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska.

In the North, blacks either were used to drive wages down or kept out of the labor market entirely. White artisans struggled to get blacks excluded from the skilled trades and eventually drove many from the cities after a series of riots. White and black workers were continually pitted against each other, with black workers being pushed out by white workers — and white workers accepting less from employers in return.<sup>6</sup>

This division between black and white workers grew during the Civil War. The war had begun with much of the white working class sympathetic to preserving the Union and keeping out slave competition. Northern white workers volunteered in unprecedented numbers to answer Lincoln's call to arms.

And this support was by no means cynical, although it clearly was not purely humanitarian. Free soil and free men were inseparably linked in the minds of the white population.

But the corruption of the emerging industrial capitalism dispersed these energies. The white working class in a period in which the rich could and did buy their way out of the army by hiring substitutes, came to see the struggle as a rich man's war and a poor man's fight. Initially the Northern army was a remarkably loyal one, but the seeds of disillusionment in the rank-and-file soldier were present at the beginning. In a little-known address to Congress on July 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln declared:

It is worthy to note that while in this, the government's hour of trial, large numbers of those in the Army and Navy, who have been favored with the offices, have resigned, and proved false to the hand which had pampered them, not one common soldier, or common sailor is known to have deserted his flag.<sup>7</sup>

The very problem of the corruption of the officer corps — that group of placemen often more interest

in pelf, power, glory, and adventure than in the actual struggle — led to massive disillusionment on the part of the Northern urban population, faced with inflation and scarcity at home. Army officers and civilians grew rich during the war, and the conflict dragged on. The Northern armies could not muster the enthusiasm or spirit to pursue the enemy very often because their officers were otherwise occupied.

The split in American society between the mass movement of the population and the profiteering of advancing capitalism is a crucial part of the story of the Civil War. Because there was little attention paid to the morale and views of the soldiers, they often became disaffected from a war that threatened to end slavery.

The draft riots of 1863 in New York City were symptomatic of this widespread anger with the corruption of the war. The poorest layers of the working class, hit by wartime inflation, reacted, often incited by Southern agents and supporters. Thousands rioted against the draft and against blacks for days, beating up and killing freedmen, invading the homes of the rich on Upper Broadway, and threatening the very stability of the society and the progress of the war.

Many thousands of whites refused to renew their

enlistments, and the fate of the army was at stake. At that point, Lincoln bowed to the pressures of the abolitionists and called upon the slaves and free blacks to join the army. More than 2,000,000 flocked to the colors.

Some, learning from the lessons of the draft riots, tried to unite the white abolitionists, the blacks, the working class, and the small farmers in a single movement to turn the war into a crusade for the preservation of the basis of egalitarian democracy. Wendell Phillips, the son of a Boston Federalist family, Harvard educated, a man of leisure, called for such unity. He looked for the continuation of the struggle for the realization of the Declaration of Independence in a new working class movement that would unite black and white. Moreover, he believed that working people would gain control over their own lives only if black rights were secured within the working class movement.<sup>8</sup>

But such efforts were not to be successful often enough. While, in some localities, blacks and whites did join during and after the war in common struggles, this was not to remain the case. From 1864 to the end of the century, efforts were made to link black and white in a single radical and working-class movement, but these eventually failed. Thus, despite the

pleas of William Sylvis of the National Labor Union, this earliest national organization of workers remained white. A similar fate was to be that of Eugene Debs' appeal to the American Railway Union in the 1890s for the inclusion of blacks within the union.

One effort for black and white unity was partially successful — and its eventual failure marked the end of a stage of struggle in the United States. The radical agrarian populist movement, a movement with a desire to forge a link with urban, working-class discontent, was one that included blacks in significant numbers. There was a separately organized but cooperative Colored Farmers Alliance as part of Southern populism. C. Vann Woodward indicates that the history of this movement can be marked by the change from the inclusion of blacks to their exclusion. Tom Watson, who was to become the prototype of the Southern white populist demagogue, appealing to the racism of the white poor, had in the early days of populism fought side by side with black farmers, once actually leading white farmers with guns to relieve a beleaguered black populist leader.<sup>9</sup>

While this is not the point to develop in this analysis, it is becoming increasingly clear that one of the central issues facing the working class movement

from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the century was this question of the unity of the working class. While there were moments of successful joint struggle, and blacks played prominent roles at times in the union movement, these efforts were to fail, and blacks were excluded from the union movement. It is also clear that this exclusion of blacks was to be crucial for limiting the development of this movement.<sup>10</sup>

Faced with its isolation from the white population, blacks in freedom turned, as they had in slavery, to the development of their own community as the source of strength and struggle for survival. The black church became the central instrument of acculturation into the big city world, just as independent religious meetings had been so central in establishing continuity and community for the slaves. The music of the slaves was further developed into modern jazz forms. The kinship structure that had emerged under slavery, where generalized extended family units allowed for children to be taken care of despite the absence of the biological parents, continued to be operative. Black ghetto children may not always live with their biological parents, but there is almost always some other adult, grandmother, aunt, uncle, or neighbor, willing to step in and raise the child.

The black community continues to be an integral social organization in the urban ghetto, although it has had to make enormous adjustments. As with most rural people who have moved into an urban environment, American blacks have resorted to the development of ideologies that have given meaning to their lives, explained to them their difficulties, and recreated the community network of relationships. For example, in the 1920s, the Universal Negro Improvement Association of Marcus Garvey recruited several million urban black people. While Garvey talked of a return to Africa, it is clear that the dominant meaning of the UNIA for those who joined was in terms of social cohesiveness and re-creation of community ties. The UNIA ran Freedom Halls in most cities where black people arriving from the South could live at a nominal charge until they found a place of their own. They could get information about jobs, churches, and other necessary matters for immigrants.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the UNIA, the thousands of small black churches played a similar role. They were often organized around a pastor and a congregation who had come together from the South; when later immigrants from the "old country" came, they had a core of people to help them make the adjustment to the new situation.

In the past fifteen years, with the development of a new movement for change in the urban ghettos, black people have become more and more ideological in their affiliations. For them, the various black nationalist ideologies have proven to be very useful. They have helped develop among black people a new sense of identity, a new sense of community, and new social and political organizations. They have forced certain concessions from the dominant white majority, and they have placed the black community in a stronger position to defend itself against the outside world. In an urban setting in which the official forces of government have done little but allow the central cities to rot, the black nationalist organizations have provided services to the black community that were needed and were not available from any other source. They have raised the demand for community control, reviving the American social contract.

Once again the black community has vigorously challenged the American social system. In so doing, it has had a major impact on American life. The churches and schools have been challenged to change their tone and their character; the mass media try to accommodate themselves to the feelings and social attitudes of young Americans, white as well as black, although the populace is always ahead of these con-

cessions; city governments have tried to stimulate change and have instead revealed their weakness and corruption; institutions, such as trade unions, have been shown to be bureaucratic and inaccessible to the wishes of those who pay dues; the peace movement has learned from the experience of black movements; Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Mexican-Americans have followed the lead of the black organizations, and a new mood has swept these communities; the mass disaffection from the values and behaviors of the older America on the part of millions of young people has taken much of its cultural apparatus from the black community. Above all, perhaps, have been the facts that the current development of life-styles far removed from the Puritanism that has hitherto completely dominated American society has borrowed much from the black community and that those younger whites of all social classes involved in this development look toward the black community for moral support.

Indeed, these changes in life-styles among young Americans, which have taken the entire world by surprise, began in the late 1950s coincident with the development of a new black change movements. If racism had its roots in the Puritan-Protestant ethic, then the abandonment of this world view cannot but

help limit racism. Many younger white Americans in their own search for new life-styles have been able at least to recognize their own racism and attempt to do something about it. Some have even understood that racism is not simply an ideology. They have directed their criticism not simply at prejudice but at institutions that embody racism. And it must be remembered that these changes among the young are no longer largely confined to the middle class but hit large sectors of the working class who are in revolt against a merit system that threatens to leave them out. Long-haired younger factory workers are becoming increasingly common.

Can the black community raise its challenge to the white world in such fashion as to capitalize upon this willingness under certain circumstances of younger whites to follow their lead? That is a political question and only can be answered politically. However, we have seen that there has been a vibrant black community forged under slavery which has been central to struggles for change in the United States. If America is to be mankind's last, best hope, it will be because there will be found ways of releasing the creative and revolutionary force of the American people. The black community will be in the forefront of those changes if they occur.

This is the promise and the challenge of the development of the American black community from 1619 to the present — a community which has always taken the lead in the struggle for the realization of the promise of the Declaration of Independence. The vision implicit in that revolutionary document of a society in which all men are guaranteed life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, can have a chance of becoming a reality only through the pressures put on all institutions by those who are the most excluded from American society. The pressure of blacks for equality intensifies all social conflicts in the United States. It has already created new forces among whites who are beginning to push for basic changes in the institutional framework that makes up American capitalism. It gives hope to millions in this country and throughout the world that the black preacher's vision of a world in which men are "free at last, free at last, Great God Almighty, free at last" might become a reality.

#### Notes

1. Charles Beard and other historians who have followed him misread the concern of the authors of the Federalist Papers with faction and class. The

founding fathers were more concerned with dealing with future class divisions, divisions which they feared as a cause of instability on the basis of their knowledge of European history, than they were with the moderate class differences that existed in their own time.

2. While this is no place to enter into a full length discussion of the matter, it is clear that in seventeenth-century Virginia, permanent chattel slavery for blacks, as distinguished from a form of indentured servitude, did not become the universal situation until after 1660, and that, for the first forty years of slavery in Virginia, blacks found it relatively easy to become free and even to own land. However, it should be stressed that there were only a small handful of blacks in Virginia at this early date.

3. Henry David Thoreau, "Essay on Civil Disobedience," in *Walden and Other Essays*, p. 296.

4. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 329.

5. Frederick Douglass and others, "Reply of the Colored Delegation to President Johnson," in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 4, p. 192.

6. For a general discussion of whites and blacks as workers, see W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, pp. 3-31, and Harold M.



Baron, "The Demand for Black Labor: Historical Notes on the Political Economy of Racism," *Radical America* 5 (March-April 1971): 1-46.

7. Abraham Lincoln, "Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 4, p. 438.

8. See the essay on Wendell Phillips in Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*.

9. See C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*. Also, Woodward, *The Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, La., 1951).

10. In the past two decades, Professor Herbert Gutman has been developing in numerous articles a history of the American working class from the Civil War to the beginning of the twentieth century, much of which deals with the complex relationship between black and white workers. A book based on this monumental body of work will soon be published, and it gives promise of being a major contribution to our understanding of the development of the American people. See, for example, Herbert S. Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890-1900," in *The*

*Negro and the American Labor Movement*, ed. Julius Jacobson, pp. 49-127.

11. Robert Hill, a Jamaican scholar, has been at work on a study of Marcus Garvey. This discussion of the UNIA Freedom Halls comes both from personal communications and from an address given by Hill in Montreal at a Black Writers Congress in 1968.

## Working-Class Self-Activity

THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS IS A subject obscure to the Old and New Left alike. For the most part, academic labor scholarship has been institutional history focusing on the trade union, and like all institutional orientations has been quite conservative. "Radical" labor history has similarly been little concerned with the working class because of its concentration on another institution, the radical political party. Marxists have occasionally talked about working-class self-activity, as well they might, given that it was Marx's main political focus; but as E.P. Thompson points out in the preface to his monumental *Making of the English Working Class*, they have almost always engaged in substituting the party, the sect, and the radical intellectual for class self-activity in their studies.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this institutional focus, labor history from whatever source generally ignores also social structure, technological innovation, and the relation between the structure and innovation. In the present article I shall attempt some notes toward a study of the American working

class since 1919 which strives to avoid the main errors of the old historiography. It must be clear from the outset that this article can be no more than suggestive, that it will be sparse and at times abstract. Hopefully, however, it will engender serious consideration and further probing into its basic themes.

The great steel strike of 1919 marks one beginning of the struggles for industrial unionism. Building on the tradition of the IWW, a gigantic strike of almost all American steel workers broke out that year; the workers divided into dozens of small craft unions, but under the leadership of two former IWW leaders, William Z. Foster and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (both soon to become leaders of the Communist Party), attempted to overcome the organizational limits of the craft structure. During World War I the introduction in the steel industry of significant technological rationalization was followed by the appearance of the entire apparatus of Taylorism, which included a whole range of procedures including time-and-motion studies and the development of new equipment to significantly increase the rate of exploitation. Despite the militancy of the workers, the craft-union form of organization was not powerful enough to withstand the implications of highly rationalized industry, and the strike was broken.

Taylorism had meant that workers could not gain anything significant by organization on a shop-by-shop basis. Monopoly capitalism, then at its most sophisticated in U.S. Steel, demanded industry-wide organization if the workers' struggle were to succeed.

Before World War I, many skilled workers had significant control over their own time. They had the right to fairly long breaks from work at their own discretion; they organized their work to suit their own needs and whims. Workers could regularly take off an extra day or two each month to handle personal affairs, which often included a small garden farm or other additional sources of income. Workers controlled much of the hiring process, directly handled the relationship with their workmates in such matters as sickness and death benefits, and successfully bargained informally with plant managers and foremen.

Taylorism and its greatest innovation, the assembly line, was introduced to try to expropriate from workers their previous freedoms. Factory life of the 1920s was characterized by significant rationalization in steel, automobiles, electrical equipment, and petroleum and chemical products. Although wages increased to \$5 per day in the automobile

industry, the amount of surplus value extracted from workers increased at a more rapid rate. Thus, while American workers received a wage level certainly higher than that known by workers in other industrially advanced countries, they also worked harder and faster than any similar group of workers in other countries. Detroit and the assembly line became synonymous on a world-wide basis in the 1920s with high wages - and a degree of alienation hitherto even unanticipated. It would take a full-length study to substantiate this; here it must be simply asserted with the hope of encouraging documentation.

The relative increase in the standard of living in the 1920s was most significant for American workers, most of whom were foreign-born or in contact with relatives in Europe, or were from poor American rural backgrounds. Under such conditions most workers who experienced an increase in the standard of living were unwilling, under conditions in which they could not see their way clear to the creation of new forms of organization, to engage in militant action. Thus in heavily capitalized and rationalized industry, the decade was one of relative peace. There should be nothing surprising about this calm, however. The problems posed by mass production and the assembly line required some time and pressure

before workers could fight back again.

The changes in American capitalism during the 1920s did not alter the low-capitalized industries, most of which were in the South. There were serious workers' struggles in sectors such as textiles, clothing, and low-priced consumer goods, where only limited technological rationalizations were economically feasible, and the labor of low-paid male and female workers was substituted for new technology. Under such conditions, the margin of profit came from attempting to make workers labor harder and accept wage cuts and deteriorating conditions. Most unions ignored these industries and made the workers look to their own resources and to whatever aid they could receive from radical organizations. In strike areas like Loray, Tennessee, Danville and Gastonia, North Carolina, and Passaic, New Jersey, the Communist Party was able to play an important role precisely because the American Federation of Labor was unwilling to attempt to organize the unskilled workers. Historians often present these strikes in such a way as to suggest their impossibility without Communist Party leadership; in my opinion this is a false impression. Indeed, long conversations I had many years ago with Fred Beal, a leading organizer of strike activity in Gastonia, suggest to me that these

strikes might have been more successful if the Communist Party had been willing to follow the lead of workers.

In the soft-coal mines of southern Illinois and in the bituminous coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia in the late 1920s and early 1930s, there were constant struggles of a similar nature. Preliminary investigations of these suggest that the self-activity of the workers was often sabotaged by the conflict of the union leadership over the mythic question, "What is the role of the workers?" This kind of conflict was particularly evident in the early 1930s in the coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia. In the coal mines of the industry and the workers were able to have a role in the industry. The soft was able to p... and... subordinated the... needs. In an... strike... organization...

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In 1958 an article in *The New International* (an American Marxist periodical, now defunct) on the New Deal had the following conclusion about why workers supported Roosevelt:

The problem is really simple if one is

willing to lay aside romantic notions based upon the experience of other countries and their working-class movements. The American working class had not yet reached a level of consciousness that enabled it to do anything but accept the concessions it was able to force out of the pro-capitalist parties. The task in the New Deal period for the labor movement was the mass organization of the industrial workers ... One could not reasonably expect the American working-class to leap so far ahead as to reject a New Deal, with its undeniable benefits, in the interests of a more class-conscious and politically-mature radical objective.

I was the author of this article. In writing it I demonstrated the backwardness, not of the working class, but of the intellectuals who fail to understand the working class. Nor was I the only one convinced of the backwardness of the American workers. Some ten years ago I spent some time with Francis Perkins, then a professor of labor economics at Cornell, but previously secretary of labor under FDR and the person most responsible for the New Deal labor policy. Madame Perkins spoke to me along the

following lines: Why didn't the working class in America ever attempt to change American society? We all expected that it would in 1933. At the first meeting of the Cabinet after the president took office in 1933, the financier and adviser to Roosevelt, Bernard Baruch, and Baruch's friend General Hugh Johnson, who was to become the head of the National Recovery Administration, came in with a copy of a book by Gentile, the Italian Fascist theoretician, for each member of the Cabinet, and we all read it with great care.

Madame Perkins was quite wrong. The American working class did change American society, despite the fact that American capitalism was very powerful and had often indicated clearly in the 1930s that it would resort to any means, if allowed to do so, to prevent a radical transformation of society.

We can estimate most sharply the power of the American working class if we look at its accomplishments comparatively. In Italy the crisis of capitalism of the decade of the Bolshevik Revolution and the World War produced Fascism as an answer to the bid of the Italian working class for power. In Germany, the crisis of capitalism produced first the Weimar Republic, which did nothing to alter the situation, and then Nazism; the consequence was the worst

defeat any working class has ever known. The German working class was pulverized - unlike the Italian working class, which was never smashed to bits under Fascism and in fact survived to destroy Fascism itself. In France essentially the same pattern as in Italy was repeated, with the difference that full-fledged Fascism came only as a result of the German military advance, since the French working class had managed to defend democracy throughout the 1930s, often over the heads of the radical parties.

In the United States the situation was different. Throughout the 1920s the working class found its organizations weakened; but in the 1930s the working class struggled and created powerful mass industrial unions of a kind never known anywhere in the world, unions that organized all the workers in most major industries throughout the nation. The working class of America won victories of a scale and quality monumental in the history of the international working class. Only the capture of state power by a relatively small working class of Russia — a state power it did not retain — has surpassed the magnitude of its victory in the thirties.

The full organization of the major American industries, however, was a mark of the victories, not the cause of the victories, of the American working class.

The unions did not organize the strikes; the working class in the strikes and through the strikes organized the unions. The growth of successful organizations always followed strike activity when some workers engaged in militant activities and others joined them. The formal organization — how many workers organized into unions and parties, how many subscriptions to the newspapers, how many political candidates nominated and elected, and how much money collected for dues and so forth — is not the heart of the question of the organization of the working class. The statistics we need to understand the labor history of the time are not these. Rather, we need the figures on how many man-hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through the slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class's own initiative.

In virtually every year since 1919, American workers have either led, or were second or third, in both the absolute and relative numbers of hours lost through strikes. In 1932 there were only 840 strikes; in 1933 there were 1,700; by 1936, 2,200; by 1937,

4,740; in 1938, only 2,500; in 1941, 4,000; in both 1944 and 1945, 5,000. In 1946, the year of the greatest militancy up to that point, there were just under 5,000 strikes involving nearly five million workers, 14 1/2 percent of the workforce. And as the strike wave developed the unions grew. All of this occurred in the midst of a great depression and after more than a decade of inactivity in the area of industrial union organization. But most important, it all occurred not because the older unions attempted to organize industrial workers, but in spite of these unions and even against their opposition. When the crisis came, the response of the AFL unions was to protect their own members' jobs and wages from the onslaught of millions of unorganized workers placed in the pool of the proletarians.

Only John L. Lewis and the oldest industrial union, the United Mine Workers, along with a few other older semi-industrial unions such as those in clothing and printing, responded at all. For the most part, what occurred was simple and direct. The workers in a given plant organized themselves into a strike committee, went out on strike, won some limited demands or lost, but maintained their organization. Eventually they joined with workers in other parts of the industry to form a national union.

There were three obstacles to the efforts of workers to organize unions. First there was the resistance from the employers who hired spies, black-listed workers, fired activists, and finally created company unions. Second was the set of obstacles created by the top-ranking union leaders. Fearing that a strong industrial union would threaten the entrenched interests of craft-union leaders, the American Federation of Labor decreed that auto workers were to be organized in local federal unions, and that later these federal unions were to be broken up and their members divided among the craft unions. In the early years of the 1930s these tactics of the unions confused, demoralized, and slowed down the organization of workers. Only after a few years did the workers gain renewed confidence to organize, if need be against the unions. Third was the set of obstacles created by the Government under the National Recovery Administration. With the cooperation of the established unions, the NRA saw to it that demands for more money or a check on the growth of speed-up were ignored.

One recent case study of the organization of a particular union is illustrative of this process of the self-activity of the working class and the obstacles it encountered.<sup>2</sup>



When workers in the Briggs Manufacturing Company, in September 1933, voted to apply for an AFL federal charter, Briggs management hastily installed a company union. When a committee of the new federal union asked management for recognition, they were flatly told that the company had already recognized an association for bargaining purposes. Hearing this, the membership voted to strike the plant. The company responded by hiring strikebreakers and continuing to operate the plant, although production was crippled. The Regional Labor Board stepped in and ordered the strike ended and an election conducted to determine whether the workers wanted the federal union or the company union to represent them.

But the company had other ideas: It had no intention of laying off non-strikers. The National Labor Board answered this by referring the case to the National Compliance Board of the NRA; the Board handed down recommendations calling for an election under rules favorable to the company union, and discriminating against the strikers. Finally, in March 1934, the Briggs case was included in the general settlement forced through by the Government to head off widespread strikes in the auto industry scheduled for March. The company agreed

to reemploy one striker for every two men hired.

The role of the AFL was characteristic. A full month elapsed after the strike began before AFL president William Green gave it official recognition (but no financial help). By the time the strike had ended, the union affiliated with the AFL in the plant was dead. The workers at Briggs turned to new organization and were among the first to create the United Automobile Workers.

Such were the experiences of auto workers throughout the industry. And after two and a half years of such defeats, inflicted by a combination of employers and government and union officials, a new movement began which would wage the sit-down strikes and from which would grow the UAW. A look at the history of the sit-downs will indicate that in this most advanced example of working-class struggle, the genuine advances of the working class were made by the struggle from below, by the natural organization of the working class, rather than by the bureaucratic elaboration of the administration of the working class from above. Symbolically, the first sit-downs came spontaneously in Atlanta, Georgia, not in Detroit under the direction of the Left.

During the early years of the Depression (before 1937), the struggles remained fairly small while

workers sought a new form. In 1934 the organization of industrial unions began in earnest. With the further downswing of wages and employment in 1937, the workers in autos, then in rubber, and then in other industries occupied the plants, slept there, ate there, refused to leave or produce, protected themselves inside the plants, and organized massive demonstrations outside. Thousands of troops surrounded the factories with tanks and artillery, not firing because of the certainty that it would further radicalize the situation. Out of the strikes came the right of workers to join unions, with virtual closed-shop conditions won in many industries.

Throughout the war, workers were faced with a general wage freeze and a commodity-scarce economy. Workers made good money by working overtime and continually demonstrating that they would never accept lower wages again. However, the most basic struggles the workers engaged in were attempts to improve working conditions, slow down the speed of work, and resist the attempts of management to turn the factories into smaller military camps by disciplining the workers. Workers in coal production engaged in very militant strikes to increase wages directly, because during the 1930s coal miners had not even been able to raise their pay.

At the end of the war, there was an attempt to roll back wage increases made during the war, to force the working class to accept a smaller share of the product. Only after the greatest outpouring of strikes and militancy since 1919 did American capitalism agree to a new wage policy.

The price of the new wage policy was the further linking of the union leadership with government and management decision-making processes. Since the end of World War II the unions have been able to gain monetary wage increases, generally speaking, to keep up with increases of productivity: unions can guarantee that the size of the unionized worker's slice of the national product does not diminish, although inflation continues to wipe out many gains. In return unions have had to insure industrial peace by disciplining the workers and curtailing their demands on all issues save money and fringe benefits. In particular unions resist demands of workers for greater shares of production and lessened exploitation.

Unions have generally given up the demand for a shorter work week. Indeed, in many industries the de facto situation now is that workers work 50 hours or more per week. Workers' pay does keep up with productivity, but only if overtime pay is included.

The grievance procedure which has been the main protection of the worker in the past has all but totally broken down. With thousands of unresolved grievances common in every major plant, the speed-up has increased very rapidly without much union opposition, automation proceeds without limitation by the union, and attempts of workers to gain control over working conditions and procedures are systematically fought by the unions.

All of this must be understood as part of the necessary device whereby the State has directly transformed capitalism since the 1930s. The State regulates the flow of capital, owns outright or indirectly large bodies of capital (for example, the aerospace program in both its public and private sectors), and through the contract — enforced by the shop committeemen and union stewards, who in effect become agents of the State — disciplines the workers. On the one hand, the New Deal acts — from the NRA (declared unconstitutional) to the Federal Reserve Act, Securities and Exchange Act, Agricultural Adjustment Act, et cetera — provided the legal context in which workers raised their wages through massive strikes at the end of World War II. On the other hand, the CIO unions became through the process the political weapons of the State against the

working class. Carefully legalized mass industrial unions were a necessary part of this development; industry-wide bargaining agents able to impose wage rates high enough to drive out all marginal producers who cut prices by super-exploitation of workers were in effect incorporated into the State apparatus.

The full incorporation of the unions within the structure of American state capitalism has led to very widespread disaffection of the workers from the unions. Workers are faced squarely with the problem of how to find means of struggle autonomous of the unions; this problem, while always present, is more prevalent under capitalism than anywhere else. As a consequence workers struggle in the factories through wildcat strikes and sporadic independent organizations. Outside the factory only young workers and black workers find any consistent radical social political expression, and even the struggles of blacks and youths are at best weakly linked to the struggles in the factory.

There is often a very sectarian and remarkably undialectical reaction to these developments. Some historians and New Leftists argue that it demonstrates that the CIO was a failure which resulted only in the workers' disciplining. This argument ignores the gains of the CIO in terms of higher living stan-

dards, more security for workers, and increased education and enlightenment. Clearly, the victories are embedded in capitalism and the agency of victory, the union, has become an agency of capitalism as well. This is a concrete example of what contradiction means in a dialectical sense; and it is part of a process which leads to the next stage of the workers' struggle, the wildcat strike.

There are two characteristics of the wildcat strike which represent a new stage of development: first, through this device workers struggle simultaneously against the bosses, the State, and the union; second, they achieve a much more direct form of class activity, by refusing to delegate aspects of their activity to an agency external to themselves.<sup>3</sup>

When the wave of wildcat strikes first began to appear as the new form of working-class self-activity and organization, it was hard to see (except very abstractly) where they would lead. But after glimpses of the future afforded by the workers' councils during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the French uprising of May and June 1968, the new society which can only be fully realized and protected by revolutionary struggle is clearly revealed: workers' councils in every department of national activity, and a government of workers councils.

## Notes

1. The last work approaching a full-scale Marxist history of the U.S. working class was in the early additions to Anthony Binba's *History of the American Working Class*, which while theoretically above average was factually far below. A mark of the backwardness of American Marxism, its failure to concern itself with its own working class, is the fact that *History of the American Working Class* by Frederick Sorge, who lived in the U.S. in the latter nineteenth century while remaining one of Marx's closest co-workers, has never been translated into English from its initial publication in *Neue Zeit*.

2. See Frank Marquart's study of the creation of a union at the Briggs Manufacturing Company in Detroit which appeared in *Speak Out*, no. 9. Unquestionably, hundreds of similar stories can be collected; doubters should listen to the sit-down stories of auto workers from Flint, Michigan, and compare them to the official UAW history which emphasized the strikes' leadership (none other than the present national officers and executive board of the UAW). Radical scholars should begin to collect materials while there is still time.

3. Marxists who are familiar with the basis of the Hegelian dialectic, in the master-slave discussion in which Hegel indicates that the slaves must struggle against elements of their own class as well as against the masters, will not be surprised by this historical analysis. In *Facing Reality* (Detroit: Facing Reality Publishing Committee, 1956), C.L.R. James offers the following useful summary of dialectics:

a. All development takes place as a result of self-movement, not organization or direction by external forces.

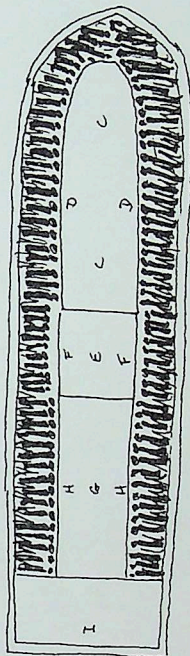
b. Self-movement springs from and is the overcoming of antagonisms within an organism, not the struggle against external foes.

c. It is not the world of nature that confronts man as an alien power to be overcome. It is the alien power that he has himself created.

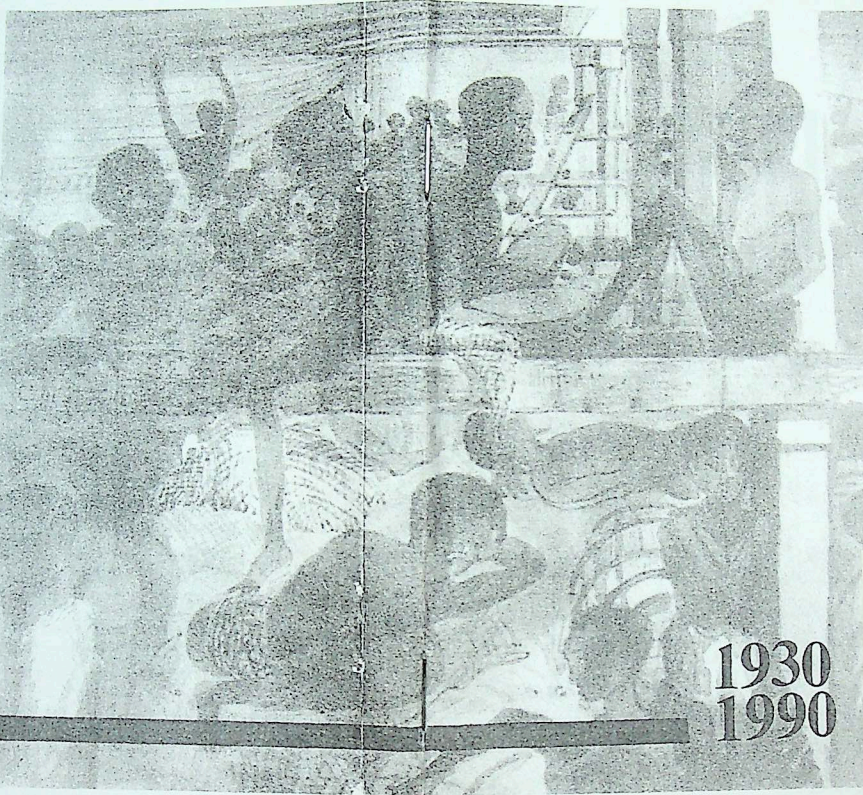
d. The end toward which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is not the enjoyment, ownership, or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, not utility.

The illustration on our cover is an adaptation of a watercolor rendered in the early 19th century and now in the possession of the National Maritime Museum. It depicts the self-activity of African-Americans on the Middle Passage from west Africa to the east coast of the Americas. It contrasts with the 1808 Parliamentary image of the slave ship showing people as mere cargo, as victims, as items of profit.

The contrast between the two images parallels the contrast between George Rawick's history of the vitality and creativity of African-Americans with innumerable institutional views which tend to treat people as numbers.



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