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Black Labor Revisited: Philip Foner
and the Future of Labor History
by Donna Murch

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Excellent discussion

Black Labor Revisited:

Philip Foner and the Future of Labor History

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(social, cultural factors) 32, 34

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Professor Waldo Martin

History 280

In the United States of America, any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured part of the republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded.

Karl Marx¹

The ideologies of racism remain contradictory structures, which can function both as vehicles for the imposition of dominant ideologies, and as the elementary forms for the culture of resistance...Race is...also the modality in which class is "lived," the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which they are [sic] appropriated and "fought through."

Stuart Hall²

¹Philip Foner quotes Karl Marx's *Capital* vol. 1, in *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1981* (New York: International Publishers), 11.

²Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance, in edited edition *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 57,55.

In 1946 Robert Weaver wrote that "the economic fate of the Negro has never been and will never be dissociated from that of all labor in the nation."³ He could have added that the reverse is also true, the economic fate of the American worker is intimately linked to that of the Negro. The historical weakness of the American labor movement is inseparable from the history of black subjugation and exclusion. And yet, frequently black workers are set apart and their concerns are not seen as central components in broad based "class struggles." As David Roediger has argued in a recent article, this is an urgent matter.⁴ The changing composition of the American workforce and the AFL-CIO's aggressive recruitment of female, minority and service sector employees highlight the changing terrain of labor organization. Contemporary labor unions are outstripping many academic labor historians who are still clinging to archaic conceptions of labor and class that obscure the numerical majority of American working people. The inability of some scholars to recognize non-white workers as part of the labor movement has led them to decry the disappearance of the working-class as a whole. Through a logic of substitution, a small sector of "male and pale" labor stands in for the whole. Too often, historians have identified with historical processes of discrimination rather than interrogated them as a social construction. Roediger explains:

Toni Morrison has brilliantly argued that one huge achievement of white racial identity in the United States has been to make the very word American imply white American so that "non-whites" have needed to have their racial identities as Americans specified. The same logic has applied to labor, which in iconography, public discourse, and historical writing has often assumed to be white and male.⁵

³ Robert C. Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1946), 236.

⁴ David Roediger, "What if Labor Were Not White and Male? Recentring Working-Class History and Reconstructing Debate on the Unions and Race," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 51, Spring 1997, pp.72-95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

This paper is an attempt to consider recent historiography of black labor in order to rethink the role of race in labor studies. The foundational experience of racial exclusion shaped both American labor institutions and the practices of black workers. Only through focusing on black workers' experience, can labor historians hope to reconceptualize narrow definitions of class based struggle.

Philip S. Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1981* remains a modern classic for anyone interested in black labor and working class history in the United States. Foner's synthesis is an extremely dense survey of black labor history spanning slavery and colonization through the first year of the Reagan presidency. This seemingly impossibly broad scope actually coalesces into a quite coherent narrative, which provides essential information on each successive historical period. The advantage of *Organized Labor and the Black Worker's* scale is its ability to effectively demonstrate how black workers have faced profound exploitation and structural barriers since their arrival on the American continent. Black labor's contemporary struggles bare the weight of decades and centuries of discriminatory practices. The challenge of the contemporary labor movement is to overturn these foundational sins. As the title implies, too often black workers are pitted against organized labor, and not until the rise of the CIO did the labor movement embrace black workers on mass scale. The Wobblies are highly praised; however, their movement had little power to dissolve the structural barriers facing black workers.

Foner belongs to a less self-conscious generation of historians who could seamlessly link the ravages of slavery with the twentieth century machinations of craft unions. Herein lie both his incredible power and his vulnerability. In the highly

specialized world of new labor and social history, Foner's matter-of-fact institutional account may seem hopelessly anachronistic. Nevertheless, his synthesis is an invaluable contribution to black labor studies and should be a starting point for approaching contemporary historiography.⁶ His two pronged approach focuses first on documenting how organized labor excluded black workers and secondly on black workers' fight for inclusion despite these barriers. They struggled to create labor institutions of their own and gain access to the larger labor movement. The twentieth century chapters are especially good, and they provide a salient, if too brief, sketch of the rise of industrial unionism, cold war repression and civil rights struggles. Given the breadth of the survey it is impossible to cover all of the material in Foner's survey, and so I will focus first on the nineteenth century chapters as the foundational period in black labor studies, before moving on to a more direct comparison between Foner's work and three contemporary monographs. At issue here, is what type of model Foner provides for writing black labor history and how his work lays the foundation for future studies' development and departure.

The United States' failure to develop an inclusive class based labor movement is the underlying theme of Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*. He focuses on how racist practices prevented white workers from incorporating black workers into labor struggles. Although the greatest burden of discrimination was obviously born by Black

⁶ By their nature, starting points are somewhat arbitrary. A number of excellent books precede Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* and he frequently relies on their groundbreaking interpretation. These seminal works include W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Negro Artisan* (Atlanta, 1902), Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo H. Greene's *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington, D.C., 1930), Sterling D. Spero and Abraham L. Harris' *The Black Worker* (New York, 1931), Robert C. Weaver's *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (New York, 1946), and perhaps most importantly Herbert R. Northrup's *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York, 1944). I have chosen to designate Foner as a starting point, only because his book is a contemporary synthesis reissued in the 1980s. These earlier works are now considered primary sources for the time periods in which they were produced.

workers themselves, stark divisions along racial lines seriously damaged the labor movement as a whole. White workers developed limited forms of class solidarity, and they frequently used the power of organization not to fight for gains of working people as a whole, but rather to defend their collective interests against black workers. Race based hate strikes punctuate the long history of the labor movement with origins dating back to the antebellum period. Artisans in Northern and border cities protested both the utilization of slaves and freed black artisans in skilled industry. In fact, Foner argues that white artisans' agitation against black labor was an important factor in the abolition of slavery in the North.

Anti-slavery sentiment was often accompanied by virulent white supremacy in northern cities. White workers' extreme prejudice forced black workers into marginal employment and strikebreaking became a crucial source of livelihood for free people of color in cities. Radical black intellectual Frederick Douglass understood this all too well. After appealing both to employers to grant black workers access to apprenticeships once trained, and to labor organizations and papers "to educate white workers on the value of unity in the struggle for a decent livelihood, regardless of race or color," Douglass angrily declared, "Colored men can feel under no obligation to hold out in a 'strike' with the whites, as the latter have never recognized them."⁷

The South produced similar antipathy towards black labor slave and free. Individuals were blamed for the institution of which they were the victims. White artisans and proto-industrial workers were increasingly pitted against black slave labor. Of the total slave population ranging between 160,000 and 200,000 people in 1850, 5%

⁷ Foner, 7.

worked at industrial pursuits.⁸ Slavery served as the main factor retarding the development of labor organization in the South. Foner gives an excellent example of how this happened. In the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond Virginia white workers struck to protest the usage of black slaves. Their employer successfully prosecuted them for "conspiracy," fired them and thereafter utilized slave labor. The possibility of being replaced by cheaper labor with no political rights made white workers vulnerable to employer power. Nevertheless, "racism blinded the workers and diverted their enmity from the capitalists to the slaves."⁹ This had long term consequences, trade union development in Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana was severely retarded.¹⁰

In the face of such a hostile environment, Negroes struggled to establish their own labor and political institutions. Foner's scholarship demolishes the myth propagated by white craft unions throughout the post-bellum period, that black people historically have opposed labor organization. Starting with the formation of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in 1808, the Coachmen's Benevolent Society and the Humane Mechanics in Philadelphia in the 1820s, and the Cook's Marine Benevolent Society in New York during the 1830s, African-Americans established independent voluntary organizations.¹¹ In 1850 Black New York artisans formed the American League of Colored Laborers with Frederick Douglass as vice-president. They hoped to foster solidarity among mechanics and promote training in "agriculture, industrial arts, and commerce."¹² The League also helped fellow mechanics set up their own businesses.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 10-11.

¹² Ibid.

Another example of antebellum black labor organization was the Association of Black Caulkers in Baltimore formed in July 1958. Black residents of this border city sought to protect their monopoly in this trade from recent Irish immigrants who were attempting to drive them out. Organic leaders like Isaac Myers emerged, who Foner identifies as "the first important black labor leader in America."¹³ Myers headed up the Colored Caulkers' Trade Union Society of Baltimore, a cooperative venture that purchased a shipyard in order to ensure work for black caulkers. Frederick Douglas was one of the first stockholders.¹⁴

The 1860s witnessed a decisive shift in labor relations that inaugurated a new era for both black and white workers. The first national trade unions were formed during the decade of the Civil War. The launching of the National Labor Union in 1866 had immense significance for all American workers.¹⁵ While there were early precedents for labor organization in the workingmen's parties of the 1820s and 1830s, no national trade unions had yet materialized.¹⁶

In the ten years from 1860 to 1870 twenty-one new national unions were formed, with the largest number appearing during the 1863-1865 period. At least 120 daily, weekly and monthly labor papers were founded in those years, another indication of the revival of the labor movement.¹⁷

A crucial issue in this early period of American working class formation was whether or not black workers would be included. Despite the radical politics of Republican Reconstruction in the South, black workers throughout the United States were largely excluded from this swelling national trend of labor organization. Although the

¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵ Eric Foner, *The Reader's Companion to American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), 627.

¹⁶ Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 15.

National Labor Union declared that it "knows no north, no south, no east, no west, neither colour nor sex, on the questions of labor," the NLU did not adopt a policy of full racial integration. Only Marxist inspired organizations like the New York Workingmen's Union and the New York State Workingmen's Assembly was willing to grant black laborers complete recognition and organization.¹⁸

The story of Frederick Douglass' son typified the plight of highly skilled black artisans in the post-bellum period. In the May of 1869, he secured employment at the Government Printing Office and applied for membership in the Columbia Typographical Union (Washington Branch of the International Typographical Union.) In order to work for the GPO, employees had to be members of the ITU. A split ensued in the ITU on whether or not to admit a "Negro" printer. Opponents rejected his application, attacking him as an interloper. Rather than directly objecting on the basis of race, they branded him "rat" or "scab."¹⁹ This pattern is manifest throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; labor organizations structurally excluded black laborers and then attacked them as enemies of the labor movement. This precedent for a decisive break between civil rights and labor organization in the first Reconstruction sadly echoes throughout the second Reconstruction.

Negro artisans responded by creating their own institutions. In 1869 Isaac Myers organized a convention for the Colored National Labor Union (CNLU). Labor organization remained segregated and the convention consisted largely of black

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹ With his usual cogence Frederick Douglass described his son's dilemma. He had been "denounced for not being a member of the Printer's Union by the very men who would not permit him to join such a union... There is no disguising the fact - his crime was his color.... Some men have shown an interest in saving my soul; but of what avail are such manifestations where one sees himself ostracized, degraded and denied the means of obtaining one's daily bread?"; Foner, 28.

delegates. After much debate, the CNLU admitted two sympathetic white Republicans in acknowledgement of the party of Lincoln's role in ending slavery. The Coloured National Labor Union existed from 1869 to 1871, and some of its delegates attended the conventions of the National Labor Union in 1869 and 1870. However, the NLU fell apart in 1870 when it passed a resolution for a Labor Reform Party. Thereafter, the national trade unions lost interest, and the NLU was reduced to a fledgling political organization devoted to "middle class panaceas like monetary reform."²⁰

Party politics played a decisive role in the split between the NLU and CNLU. The CNLU strongly supported the Republican Party and feared that the National Labor Union's support for an independent labor party would divide the vote and thereby hasten the decline of Republican rule. The Ku Klux Klan was the biggest obstacle to labor organization of black people in the south, and CNLU delegates dared not stray from the party of Reconstruction.²¹ Foner compares the aspirations of the NLU and CNLU. The contrast between the aims of the unions is indicative of the vastly different problems facing white and Negro workers in this period:

The right to work without regard to race, a just and equitable system of apprenticeship, education, temperance, fair and full remuneration for a day's work – these were the cardinal principles of Negro labor's program. The key to the black American's future was not a change in the monetary system but the chance to work and rise in American society through industry, temperance, frugality and education.²²

The Knights of Labor emergence in 1869 represented the next great hope for the organization of black workers. According to Foner, the Knights were the first nationwide labor movement that attempted a broad based class solidarity, and made a

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

²¹ Ibid., 32-46.

²² Ibid., 32.

substantial effort to fully incorporate black workers. With their motto, "an injury to one is the concern of all," the Knights promised an upsurge in ephemeral American class-consciousness. The Knights' southern organizing drive began in 1878 with fifteen organizers assigned to the region. Both blacks and whites were recruited with equal priority. Black workers "formed or joined locals of longshoremen, miners, iron, and steel workers, and farmer workers."²³ Even the reformist black leader Booker T. Washington joined the Knights of Labor in West Virginia.²⁴ Women were admitted in 1881, and this new opportunity proved very important to black domestics including "laundresses, chambermaids and housekeepers" in the South.²⁵ In an 1885 convention, the executive board approved a resolution assigning a "Negro organizer for each of the old slave states."²⁶ Some of trade unions affiliated with the Knights blunted their restrictions and allowed black workers into select white locals or established new segregated locals where white opposition to integration was too strong. In the Gulf coast ports of Galveston, New Orleans, and Savannah the Federation of Dock Workers dared admit black longshoreman, draymen, yardmen on equal terms.²⁷ Even, the ultra-conservative Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners had set up fourteen black unions across the South.²⁸

Nineteenth century interracial labor solidarity reached its high water mark on May 1, 1886 when "340,000 workers demonstrated for the eight-hour day on the first May Day in labor history, and 200,000 actually went out on strike."²⁹ The leadership had actually tried to squelch the general strike, but rank-and-file Knights participated in the

²³ Ibid., 48.

²⁴ Ibid., 77.

²⁵ Ibid., 48.

²⁶ Ibid., 48.

²⁷ Ibid., 49.

²⁸ Ibid., 49.

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

eight-hour day protests. "In Louisville, more than 6000 blacks and whites marched in the eight-hour demonstration."³⁰ Incredible state and employer repression ensued, and the Knights would never again attain this level of strength.

After 1886, the Knights became much more attractive to black workers than white. Black membership accelerated, particularly in the South, at such a high rate that by 1887, black people accounted for twenty percent of the Knights' 511,351 members. A New Orleans newspaper estimated that approximately 90,000 black Knights were organized into a total of 400 local unions across the country.³¹ Foner speculates why the Knights became so much more popular among Negro workers:

The reform program of the Knights stressed land reform, increased education, and workers' cooperatives, matters of minor interest to the national trade unions, which concentrated on higher wages, shorter hours, and improved working conditions. But the program appealed to blacks, especially in the South, for it buoyed their hopes of escaping oppression and domination by the landlord-merchant power.³²

Uncharacteristically, Foner deviates from his usual institutional analysis to note that social factors played an important role in catalyzing black support for the Knights. The Association's dense web of cultural activity fueled black enthusiasm. Churches and fraternal societies sponsored "picnics, banquets, socials and the like" in support of the Knights, while traditional trade unions neglected such practices.³³

As the Knights entered a period of decline after Hay Market, the top-level leadership retreated from its earlier policy of racial egalitarianism. In a violent labor dispute in New Orleans in 1887, black and white agricultural workers struck together for higher wages. The Sugar Planters' Association crushed the strike and imported

³⁰ Ibid., 50.

³¹ Ibid., 56.

³² Ibid., 56.

strikebreakers. However, labor unrest continued and when another interracial strike was staged, Louisiana Governor McEnry called in the militia. Four black workers were killed outright and five were wounded. In the ensuing confrontation with employers, a number of black workers were lynched. When the black press called upon Terrence Powderly and the leadership of the Knights to prosecute the groups responsible for the massacre, he responded by lecturing them on the evils of strikes and instructing the black knights that "cooperation is the true remedy for the ills of industry."³⁴ In the coming years, the Knights' commitment to black workers continued to wane, and by the turn of the century, Terrence Powderly had become an ardent defender of white supremacy. Black knights responded by leaving the order in droves. By 1891, the majority had fled the association.

Despite their rather unsavory end, the Knights of Labor had set an important precedent was set for interracial unionism. Foner considered their demise a tragic occurrence, "For a brief period, a national labor body had actually challenged the racist structure of American society."³⁵ His position is summed up by a black newspaper editorial from the time. The *Globe and Lance* wrote in 1886 that although the Knights of Labor were "not organized as the special champion of the negro.... it has done more to abolish the color line, south and north...than all politicians and special friends of freedom."³⁶

Out of the industrial ashes of the Knights of Labor, rose the narrowly defined craft unionism of the AFL. In 1881 Samuel Gompers helped found the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions which was later renamed the American Federation

³³ Ibid., 57.

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

³⁵ Ibid., 63.

³⁶ Ibid., 63.

of Labor (AFL) in 1886. A British immigrant schooled in Fabian Socialism, Gompers had spent his formative years in the American Cigar Makers International Union (CMIU). Initially affiliated with the Knights of Labor, Gompers and other trade union leaders fled the Order in the 1880s to form a separate trade union international.³⁷ After witnessing violent backlash against the Knights in the aftermath of Haymarket, Gompers hoped to create a tight federation of highly skilled craft unions, which would not bring "out the bully in the state that crushed unions as it beat and bruised individuals."³⁸ "A single bomb had demolished the eight hour movement," wrote the founder of the American Federation of Labor, and this was "a lesson Gompers would not soon forget."³⁹

Foner is highly critical of Gompers and the AFL's trade union philosophy between 1881 and 1915. While the AFL argued publicly in the 1880s and 1890s that it was not racially exclusionary and made some noise about organizing non-white workers for the good of all, the principle of craft unionism functioned as a *de facto* form of segregation. Given the racial stratification of jobs and employment, craft unions spelled disaster for black and immigrant workers. Foner explains:

The craft orientation of the AF of L and the policy of limiting union organization to skilled craft workers nullified the lofty principle of racial equality and led inevitably to the abandonment of the black worker even during the AF of L's early years.⁴⁰

To make matters worse, after half-hearted attempts to organize the small numbers of black skilled workers, the Federation bowed under pressure from lily white locals. When unions would not admit black workers, the AFL agreed to recognize segregated

³⁷ Eric Foner, *Dictionary of American History*, 456.

³⁸ Laurie, 198.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁰ Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 70.

auxiliaries and grant them affiliation. The AFL constitution declared that, "Separate charters may be issued to central labor unions, local unions, or federated labor unions composed exclusively of colored workers where in the judgement of the Executive Council it appears advisable."⁴¹

The policy of Jim Crow unionism had serious repercussions for black workers. In many cases they were forced to work longer hours at lower pay with no recourse. Segregated locals did not receive support from municipal central labor bodies, and as a result black craftsmen lacked the leverage of their white counterparts in negotiating workplace disputes. By 1910 "eight AF of L national affiliates...denied membership to blacks by ritual or constitutional provision: the Wire Weavers' Protective Association, the Order of Switchmen's Union in North America, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, the Order of Railway Telegraphers, the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks, the Commercial Telegraphers Union, the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers and Iron Ship Builders, and the International Association of Machinists."⁴²

Other internationals chose more informal means of keeping out black craftsmen. Common practices included erecting "stringent skill requirements" for applicants that disadvantaged Negro workers historically denied industrial employment and charging high admission fees for apprenticeship programs.⁴³ The cumulative effect of these barriers ensured that categories of race and skill became synonymous. Too often, both in ideology and union practice, craft organization became a wage of whiteness.

As in so many things, exceptions proved the rule. Between the 1890s and World War One, two unions, the International Longshoremen's Unions (ILU) and the United

⁴¹ Ibid., 72-73.

⁴² Ibid., 73.

Mine Workers (UMW) defied the norm of exclusionary craft unionism. In these two industries black people were a crucial part of the labor supply and could not be ignored. Du Bois acknowledged that these two organizations were the only national unions that "welcome Negroes in nearly all cases."⁴⁴ Richard L. Davis, a black labor activist from Ohio helped co-found the United Mine Workers. Davis served on the National Executive Board (NEB) of the UMW and was present at the first session of the national union in 1890 in Columbus, Ohio. He helped author the constitution, which declared that "No member in good standing shall be barred or hindered from obtaining work on account of race, creed, or nationality."⁴⁵ The United Mine Workers were an industrial union that organized "industries and not occupations."⁴⁶ In some states such as Alabama, black miners even outnumbered whites. By 1904, estimates indicated that over half of the 13,000 UMW membership consisted of black miners. At the turn of the century, black miners' activity within the UMW provides some of the strongest evidence that a militant black union consciousness thrived in spite of the discriminatory practices of the AFL.

Despite its maverick precedents for interracial labor organization, the UMW did not fully achieve its professed aim of racial equality. Black rank-and-file militance far outstripped that of the white leadership. Too often black workers were only marginally incorporated into union leadership to pacify the black rank-and-file and prevent strikebreaking. This is nowhere more evident than in untimely demise of Richard Davis. After being barred from work by Ohio coal operators, Richard Davis died tragically in terribly impoverished conditions at age thirty-five. Despite his great contributions to the

⁴³ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 83.

founding and expansion of the UMW, the union refused to support him and he died of "lung fever" at age 35.⁴⁷ Throughout the period, Black miners consistently protested their underrepresentation among the union leadership to no avail. Herbert Hill observed that "Black miners might protest and supplicate to their dying day, but there was little chance of moving the main white union leaders to their point of view."⁴⁸

Philip Foner's stress on the overt role of bigotry in the AF of L's policy remains an important contribution to labor historiography. He notes that earlier interpretations of Gompers's craft unionism emphasized the pragmatic nature of Gompers' leadership, which forced him to relinquish the Federation's early commitment to racial equality. To organize white workers in the South and create a strong national labor movement, the AF of L could not push against the advancing tide of Jim Crow. Foner, by contrast, cites Gompers' numerous private declarations about the inherent inferiority of Black, Asian, and Southern/Eastern European labor and argues that the AFL's commitment to racial equality was disingenuous from the start. AFL organizers reflected the bigotry of the top leadership, and rather than trying to ameliorate prejudice among the white rank-and-file, they often fostered it. Frequently blacks were accused of being incapable of steady employment and therefore branded as "natural strikebreakers."⁴⁹ While the AFL had an early period of superficial commitment to organizing black workers in the 1880s and early 1890s, by the eve of World War I, the Federation had become an industrial pillar of Jim Crow.

As is evident from the description above, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* is an invaluable resource for major themes and events of nineteenth and twentieth century

⁴⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁸ Ibid., Foner quotes Herbert Hill, 98.

African American and labor history. Foner effectively merges labor and black studies to provide a critical account of the labor movement. His documentation of black labor leaders is especially laudable, and many of his insights have yet to be fully incorporated into contemporary labor studies. After reading Foner, it should be impossible to question the role of racism and white supremacy in damaging the strength of the labor movement.⁵⁰

In spite of Foner's unquestionable status as one of the founding fathers in black labor history, there are some important limitations to his approach. First, starting in the antebellum period Foner uses a relatively narrow definition of labor. He focuses on industrial labor in the cities, despite its marginality in slavery and freedom. The focus on organized labor narrows his scope of black workers considerably. Only those sectors that produced official labor organizations are covered extensively. (His discussion of communist sharecroppers unions in the later chapters in the book is an important exception, but it is relatively brief.) This is obviously problematic given that until the mid-twentieth century, the vast majority of black people worked at domestic and agricultural pursuits. The omission of these sectors is an important starting point for contemporary labor historians like Tera Hunter and Robin D.G. Kelley. Influenced by the New Labor History's broadening of the parameters of the working class, they produced monographs, which focused on these areas of employment. As we will see, their method of writing black labor history challenged traditional ideas of organized

⁴⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁰ A number of labor scholars continue to minimize the role of race and racism in weakening the American labor movement. Too often, black workers appear only as a marginal side-show to the main event of party politics, labor unions, and struggles with the police. Ava Baron has pointed to the unfortunate tendency of the new institutionalism to ignore both women workers and the importance of gender in shaping labor struggles. This criticism is equally applicable to their dismissal of racial exclusion as a foundational pillar

labor, and exposed how labor issues are embedded within social and cultural structures of feeling.⁵¹

The second noteworthy oversight in *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* is black women workers. According to William Harris, one of the most fundamental characteristics distinguishing the black and white working class in the United States, is the disproportionate employment of black women. "Large numbers of black women participated in the labor force for decades while white women entered the work force in large numbers only recently."⁵² Women and women's work is a crucial part of the history of black working class formation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly from the perspective of the New Labor History, Foner's survey is largely unable to account for the intellectual and cultural aspects of black working class life. Significant portions of people's lives are spent independently of work, union activity and public politics. Given the entrenched patterns of discrimination and the alienated relationship to work that it often produced, many of the most meaningful aspects of black life are spent off the job. Leisure, consumption and family lie at the heart of working class culture. The narrow focus on labor institutions and their discriminatory practices ignores the role of cultural production in mediating

of union politics. See Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 13.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams coined the term structure of feeling to refer to an expanded idea of culture which "considered social formation as a totality." The unique contribution of the working class was a tradition of social institutions and oppositional culture that exploded narrow ideas of culture as high art or transcendent aesthetic production. Williams' theories of culture were built on Gramsci's idea of hegemony that sought to expose "a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values-constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming." Quoted by Dennis Dworkin in *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 152.

⁵² William Harris, *The Harder We Run : Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4.

social relations. This has implications well beyond the realm of culture. Labor organization is shrouded in a variety of practices and political ideologies, which can either catalyze or retard black support for unionization. As Kevin Gaines' *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* has shown, intra-racial class relations also helped shape black conceptions of labor. Class relations in the black community were often encoded in cultural terms, which helps explain the power of color and modes of dress in determining social status. The "social history of politics" is an important dimension of black labor studies.⁵³ At this point, I would like to turn to three contemporary monographs that focus on themes overlooked within Foner's broad institutional survey.

Tera Hunter's brilliant new study, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labor's After the Civil War*, is a terrific contribution to the New Labor History generally, and to black urban and labor historiography specifically. The book takes its title from the response of a newly freed woman Julie Tillory to the question of why she would leave the certainty of her former master's plantation to face the wages of the Atlanta after the Civil War. Tillory replied matter-of-factly: "To 'joy my freedom." Hunter explains, "Tillory's resolve typified the spirit of ex-slaves determined to truly be free, despite the absence of material comforts."⁵⁴

With this quote as inspiration, the author attempts to capture black women's vision of freedom and self fulfillment not only in work but also in the home, neighborhood and the larger social world after emancipation. Family, friends and leisure

⁵³ Robin D.G. Kelley takes this term from the social history of Victoria de Grazia in his first book *Hammer and the Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xi.

activities were meaningful parts of these women's lives and often provided an arena that was much more satisfying than labor itself. In the context of black women's economic marginality, leisure and private life laid a foundation for working class life.

Racial caste and the demands of the Southern political economy dictated that black women work, and in Southern cities their options were confined to household labor. Their experiences as laborers would determine how meaningful freedom would be. But for ex-slave women, whose social value had long resided in the labor power they could expend to benefit their masters and in the prospective laborers they could reproduce, work was a means of self-sufficiency, not an end in itself.⁵⁵

Hunter skillfully negotiates the contradictions of black working women's experience after emancipation. Paid labor is necessary for establishing autonomy, but it is also the site in which freed women experienced a loss of independence. White employers attempted to exert control over former slaves, and the workplace became a major arena for the struggle for freedom. Women insulated themselves by establishing informal labor organizations, breaking employers' rules, changing jobs at will, and asserting their right to pleasure, community and a private life independent of domestic duties.

The term domestic encompassed a variety of occupations in nineteenth century America. Live-in and general maids, child-nurses, cooks and washer women all performed domestic labor services. White families in the New South were heavily dependent on black women's labor in these jobs. This was nowhere more evident than in the Atlanta boycott that threatened to cripple the International Cotton Exhibition in 1881.⁵⁶ The city of Atlanta hoped to showcase the modernity and efficiency of its cotton processing, textile and manufacturing production, priding itself on having captured the

⁵⁴ Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 74.

exposition from its rivals, New Orleans, Memphis, and Louisville.⁵⁷ Local boosters not only praised the productivity of local industry, but also the tractability of its largely black workforce. "New South proponents heralded Southern workers as 'teachable, tractable, thankful for employment and utterly unacquainted with the strike.'"⁵⁸

Black washer women's activism on the eve of this grandiose event threatened to destroy the artifice of Southern self-promotion. Laundry workers, who had recently gained a standard pay rate after their participation in the Great Strike of 1877, started preparing a year before the Exhibition.⁵⁹ They developed special organizing techniques, including door-to-door canvassing; pressure tactics threatening strike breakers with retaliation, appeals to spouses through social networks and political lobbying. Participants gathered nightly to coordinate the strike and keep morale high. These techniques proved incredibly effective, and in three weeks the ranks of striking washerwomen swelled from twenty to three thousand.⁶⁰

In order to avert this potential disaster for the city, local leaders stepped in and arrested a number of the participants. In fact, the police records are one of the main sources on the strike used by Hunter. In the aftermath of the strike, the city of Atlanta sought to prevent labor organization by regulating the laundry industry and forcing washer women to purchase work permits. They also provided funds to build an industrial laundry business that would undercut the rates of independent laundresses. None of these attempts at labor repression came to fruition. White families were simply too

⁵⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 91.

dependent on black female labor, and not until the introduction of the electric washing machine in the 1940s, were washerwomen displaced.

“The strike is also suggestive of the character of domination in the emergent New South,” explains Hunter, “White employers certainly had the power to confine black women to domestic work, but not the unilateral power to determine how and under what conditions that labor would be organized and performed.”⁶¹ Between 1879 and 1881, black labor and political activism surged through fissures in the still semi-permeable “color wall” of Jim Crow. The washerwomen’s strikes were a part of a larger tide of black labor militance in the later half of the nineteenth century that challenged the repressive liberal capitalism of the New South. Throughout the Reconstruction and Redemption period black workers across a variety of industries, including municipal employees, lumberyard workers, coopers, brickmakers, common laborers, longshoremen and domestics, staged a series of strikes in Atlanta to protest low wages and poor treatment. This activism culminated in the formation of the Colored National Labor Union by local trade unions.

Hunter’s micro-history of Atlanta labor politics gives much more detailed background to the rise of the CNLU than Foner’s comparative survey which focuses on relations between the CNLU and its lily white counterpart the NLU. Her book is a vivid glimpse into the rich world of black mutual aid and benevolent societies that formed a thriving culture, bridging work and leisure. Black women actively participated in this movement both as workers and as social agents. Frequently, their working-class institutions were organized along gender lines and followed a sororal or fraternal model. Secret societies such as the Daughters of Samaria, Daughters of Bethel, Sisters of

Friendship, and Sisters of Love were extremely popular, and often rivaled churches in membership.⁶² The cultural infrastructure within the Black community provided relief to the poor, sick, widowed and unemployed, and in some cases catalyzed informal labor organization. Reminiscent of Foner's argument about the cultural pull of the Knights of Labor, some of these post-bellum associations actually functioned as "labor unions and political leagues."⁶³

Women who were denied the ballot indirectly asserted electoral influence through organizations like the Rising Daughters of Liberty who raised campaign funds and promoted their own political issues. In Atlanta, women employed a variety of political tactics including petitioning "local and federal officials to hire black police officers and teachers, to provide jobs on the state railroads, to build school buildings, to pave streets, and to deliver potable water and sewer connections."⁶⁴ They also lobbied for local candidates, protested lynchings and organized mass meetings to develop "collective stances on public policies." Secret societies formed the backbone of labor organization and as a result, Hunter acknowledges the difficulty in finding documentary sources on the 1881 strike and those preceding it.⁶⁵

There are no extant records of the Washing Society or its course of action after the strike ended. Likewise, it is impossible to determine how much continuity or turnover there was among members of each successive organization. It is highly likely that all of the domestic workers' associations in Atlanta, as well as in Jackson and Galveston, adopted the institutional framework of secret societies. The resilience and legacy of secret societies in generating labor-inspired protests, whether they were explicit trade associations or not, would live on long after the strike.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ibid., 97.

⁶² Ibid., 70.

⁶³ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 82-90.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 88.

Hunter's study of alternative forms of labor organization is an important contribution to the growing literature on black labor and working class studies.

Domestic workers have often been excluded from labor history, because they have one of the lowest rates of unionization. The concentration of women in these jobs, combined with the highly personal nature of employment – by family rather than corporation – precluded traditional forms of organization. Hunter's valiant attempt to write the history of these workers in the face of limited sources, is an important expansion of the terrain of the New Labor History. She convincingly argues that the informal labor organization sponsored by community institutions garnered substantial wage raises for black washer women in the New South. Given the incredible forces of repression these women faced, including potential incarceration, violation and murder, this was a remarkable accomplishment. Another important form of labor resistance among domestic workers' was quitting. While washerwomen possessed the greatest autonomy and therefore developed the most resilient forms of collective organization, individual domestic workers resisted low pay and over work by frequently quitting their jobs to search for more optimal employment. This fact has serious implication for the methodology used in labor studies. High rates of turn-over and a constantly shifting workplace necessitate that working-class people be studied independently of the "shop floor" which may change regularly. The convergence of the labor and social history attempted to reckon with this problem. Top-down labor studies that focus only on formal institutions ultimately obscure labor resistance among the most exploited social strata.

Hunter's monograph should serve as a prolegomenon for future nineteenth century working class histories. *To 'Joy My Freedom* provides insight into a number of

growing historiographical fields, and is a model for interdisciplinary historical scholarship. First, in contrast to Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, Hunter is able to fully incorporate social and cultural factors into work place struggle.

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Black washer women waged successful labor struggles with the city of Atlanta by utilizing community networks and resources outside the traditional labor movement. This is a crucial dimension of black labor history, because it highlights what radically different forms class based struggle took within the black community. Because organized labor had so little to offer black workers, they turned inward to their own institutions to wage collective struggles. What may appear as cultural activity was often tied to broader social struggles. Her analysis of the repression of black working class dancehall by white middle class reformers is one of the best examples of how she deftly mixes political and cultural analysis:

The blues aesthetic is the key to understanding why African-American vernacular dance was such a contested terrain in Atlanta and the urban South and how it generated conflict over the black body. As an object of discipline and liberation, the body is a site where a society's ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality are constructed conforming to cultural ideologies. The body is a vehicle through which labor produces wealth, although the powerful usually resist acknowledging and rewarding the centrality of labor in the production of wealth.⁶⁷

White employers' push for control in the New south extended well beyond labor regulation and trade union repression. Working-class leisure activities triggered anxieties about black labor spent outside the industrial sphere. In contrast to amusement parks that reflected capitalist principles of standardized consumer leisure, dance halls were relatively autonomous spaces where working class people could exercise spontaneous pleasures. The double meaning of the term "work" in black idiom which refers to both

physical labor and strenuous dance encodes this tension. "Dancing hard, like laboring hard, was consistent with the ethic of capitalism," explains Hunter, "Black working-class dance, like the blues, looked back to the vernacular roots and forward to the modern world. Black women had played a pivotal role in asserting this expressive practice, replicating dimensions of the social world around them."⁶⁸

Secondly, Hunter's monograph is an important contribution to new feminist labor studies that continue to focus on white women's experience by privileging tensions between public/private and production/reproduction dichotomies. In a new anthology entitled *Work Engendered: Toward A New History of American Labor*, editor Ava Baron provides a succinct overview of new research in feminist labor history. She describes how women labor historians have incorporated two major veins of scholarship. First, they have drawn upon the New Labor History, which following in the footsteps of Herbert Gutman sought to redefine labor history as a broadly conceived working class history which "demonstrated that forms of worker resistance other than participation in labor unions were possible and important to consider."⁶⁹ Secondly, women labor scholars inspired by Joan Scott have turned to a growing body of feminist and post-structuralist theory that challenges "additive models" of gender, class, and race. Instead, they are seeking "to incorporate difference into the very meaning of being a woman."⁷⁰

Tera Hunter's monograph is a good example of how a working historian can use these theoretical insights. Hunter shows clearly that for Black women emerging out of slavery, the privilege of separate spheres is largely irrelevant. In fact, systems of racial

⁶⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 186.

⁶⁹ Ava Baron, 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 34.

domination often inverted ideas of women's agency, and the assertion of femininity became an act of rebellion for nineteenth-century African-American women. The antebellum chapters of the book relate a number of incidents in which black women historically denied the privileges of the sheltered white womanhood, asserted traditional ideas of gender. It was not uncommon for slave women working as domestic servants to dress up in the clothes of their mistress and dawn perfume. These acts were transgressive precisely because black women had been historically excluded from the category of "Woman." Their assertion of vanity contradicted the view of black women as chattel. After the Civil War, a number of black women struggled to stay within the confines of the home, but material deprivation of black people ensured high rates of female employment. Later in the century, black washerwomen whose low wages prevented them from acquiring fine apparel would often wear the clothes of their clients. It became popular lore among white employers that if a church event or social were planned on Sunday, they would not receive certain items of clothing until the following week. Like quitting, pan-toting, and informal organization, these everyday practices were also methods of labor resistance.

The rebellion of these individual acts points towards the direct intersection between class, gender, and racial regimes of control. As Kimberle Crenshaw has shown black women's lived experience as racial and gender "other" subjects them to a double jeopardy of oppression. Therefore, strategies that they evolve as women differ radically from those of whites. Crenshaw explains:

Black feminism offers an intellectual and political response to that experience. Bringing together the different aspects of an otherwise divided sensibility, Black feminism argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing, that Black women are

marginalized by a politics of race and of gender, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both.⁷¹

Tera Hunter's monograph has successfully incorporated modes of analysis called for by an expanding body of black feminist scholarship. Baron's tendency to focus exclusively on sexual difference within the labor movement obscures the resemblance of black male and female experience forged by common racial subjugation. Hunter, by contrast, emphasizes how men and women encouraged their spouses to participate in strikes. Family provided an important source of solidarity in a white supremacist world. At the same time, she acknowledges how gender subordination within and outside the black community subjected black women to the threat of domestic violence and sexual assault without legal redress. In sum, black women's "lives and labors" in the half century after the Civil War serves as an important counterpoint to white working-class women's experience, and it needs to be fully incorporated into broader based studies of gender. Through a narrowly focused monograph on domestic workers in Atlanta, Hunter has done much to achieve this aim. She has succeeded at the elusive accomplishment of a good ~~historian~~ social historian – through the careful study of a single part she has been able to capture the complexity of a larger whole.

Robin D. G. Kelley's *The Hammer and the Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, is another contemporary labor history which elaborates themes largely overlooked in Philip Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*. Written in 1991, this history of communist labor and political organization in Alabama is one of the most influential new labor histories. Kelley argues against a conventional literature that

⁷¹ Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," in *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assertive Speech and the First Amendment* (San Francisco:

sees black southerners as the pawns of Soviet inspired communists. Like a generation of social historians who sought to write communist history from the bottom-up, he chose to focus not on external influences in US left social movements, but rather on the local conditions that made their expansion possible. Kelley shows how an organic tradition of black protest spurred on by an ever-more-oppressive Southern political economy created fertile ground for communist organization.⁷² Black southerners' participation in the movement transformed ideology at its root, while Marxism's cogent social critique left a lasting impression on black working class culture. Kelley explains:

Far from being a slumbering mass waiting for Communist direction, black working people entered the movement with a rich culture of opposition that sometimes contradicted, sometimes reinforced the Left's vision of class struggle. The Party offered more than a vehicle for social contestation; it offered a framework for understanding the roots of poverty and racism, linked local struggles to world politics, challenged not only the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy but the petit bourgeois racial politics of the black middle class, and created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could analyze, discuss, and criticize the society in which they lived.⁷³

In the 1930s Alabama's Communist Party was able to make substantial inroads into the local black community. In fact, during the first five years of its founding, the Alabama communist party functioned as a "race organization" that came to rival middle-class reformist agencies like the NAACP.⁷⁴

The class and race composition of Birmingham and its hinterland embodied the creed of the New South. A legacy of black slavery and peonage haunted a lurching industrialization heavily dependent on extractive industry. By 1910, African-Americans

Westview Press, 1993), 121.

⁷² Kelley, xiii.

⁷³ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁴ Ibid., xii.

composed more than 90% of the unskilled labor force, and the city contained one of the largest black urban populations in the New South.⁷⁵ The majority of black men were employed in sharecropping and mining, both of which were largely non-unionized. The collapse of the Knights of Labor in the 1890s and the local UMWA under the burden of state repression after World War One left a gaping void of labor organization that would not be filled until the mid-1930s.⁷⁶

The conditions in Alabama at the onset of the Depression made the accomplishment of an interracial based movement for black civil and economic rights all the more amazing. Black people were almost completely disenfranchised, and a half century of peonage and Klan violence had forced the vast majority into marginal subsistence. For people who were already so chronically impoverished, the Depression spelled disaster. As conditions grew worse, resentment swelled against reformist organization. The tiny black middle-class, steeped in the tradition of Booker T. Washington, could offer few innovative solutions to the desperate problems facing working people. In contrast to northern cities which boasted a plethora of black protest organizations ranging from socialist to nationalist, the political spectrum of Birmingham was very narrow.⁷⁷ The local chapter of the NAACP, composed largely of black business elite dependent on amicable relations with whites actually attacked communists for breaching the color line.⁷⁸ In this context, Alabama communists became a singular voice of opposition that dared articulate the crisis facing the overwhelming majority of black residents. Their willingness to fight for unionization, relief, and anti-lynching law

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁷ For an instructive contrast see Mark Naison's *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

appealed to black working-class people's aspirations for social change. Herein, lay their success.

Organic leaders like Angelo Herndon, Al Murphy, Henry O. Mayfield and Hosea Hudson emerged out of the Alabama CP. Often their leadership profiles flouted stereotypical portraits of communists. According to Kelley they "rose from respected, upwardly mobile, working-class families; the Party merely constituted an alternative stepping stone toward respectability within the confines of their world."⁷⁹ Both Mayfield and Hudson were active in their churches and garnered prestige by singing in gospel quartets. Their participation in the CP reflected intra-class tensions within the black community. While professional and business elites looked upon them with disdain, these organizers represented a stable and elite portion of working-class Alabama. Class based organization served their own interests for a higher standard of living and greater protection from the wages of Jim Crow. However, because of the shared nature of racial oppression across black social-strata, black struggle did not always assume the forms that the white dominated national leadership of the CP expected. "Because racism prevailed, the kind of counter-hegemonic ideology Party purists had hoped for never took hold among black Communists," explains Kelley, "They became Communists out of their concern for black people and thus had much more in common with black elite whose leadership they challenged. The communist party was such a unique vehicle for black working-class opposition because it encouraged interracial unity without completely

⁷⁸ Kelley, 109.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 114.

compromising racial politics.”⁸⁰ Black communists in Alabama developed a unique movement culture that drew incongruously on ideas of racial uplift.

Kevin Gaines’ *Uplifting the Race: Black leadership and the Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* has provided important insights into how to study class relations within the black community. Despite Gaines’ national focus on the genesis and continuity of racial uplift ideology, his analysis is very useful for understanding the complex reaction to Alabama’s CP by various social strata within the local black community. His project is a revisionist one, which seeks to reinterpret the Booker T. Washington – W.E.B. Du Bois debate through examining the social relations out of which it emerged. He argues against the interpreting black politics on a continuum from assimilationist to separatist, pointing instead to how different ideas of class shaped black strategies for advancement. Gaines shows how black elites articulated the ideology of uplift both as a defensive response against white repression and a means of distinguishing themselves from the black working-class majority.

Through uplift ideology, elite and less privileged African-Americans were striving for bourgeois respectability in the absence of rights or freedom. Their hope was that rights and freedom would accrue to those who had achieved the status of respectability. And although marital status, the possession of a home or education, the material condition of many blacks with these aspirations was often indistinguishable from that of impoverished people of any color. Consequently, through uplift ideology, elite blacks also devised a moral economy of class privilege, distinction, and even domination *within the race*, often drawing on patriarchal gender conventions as a sign of elite status and “race progress.”⁸¹

Because a group that aspired to rather than achieved the full power and status of a bourgeois class created uplift ideology, it remained a largely defensive strategy. The

⁸⁰ Ibid., 116.

⁸¹ Gaines, 17.

tenuous nature of black elites contrasted with that of their white counterparts. Although they modeled themselves after hegemonic conceptions of cultural and material success, they remained fractured as a class.

During the depression large portions of the black middle and upper-classes actively fought against the Party, deploying an anticommunist rhetoric that was nearly indistinguishable from that of white stalwarts. In the tradition of Bookerite uplift, they opposed collective struggle, arguing instead for hard work, thrift and individually focussed initiative. Nevertheless, there were significant exceptions. Some black professionals made secret donations to the Party, and a Birmingham dentist named Doc Collins offered to intercept correspondence for the Sharecroppers Union (SCU).⁸² Even more striking was the response to a survey conducted among black businessmen in the 1930s. "When confronted with the statement, 'Democracy in this country is a capitalistic dictatorship,' 75 percent of the Southern respondents felt the assertion was quite accurate."⁸³

Class relations were continually shaped and mediated by the politics of racial repression, in some case allowing black upper classes to identify with working people. This helps explain the power of race based, nationalist appeals across class strata. The insecure nature of the black bourgeoisie prevented them from consolidating their interests as a class independently from their poorer constituents. Therefore, the Alabama Party's ability to function as a "race organization" was able to capture the imagination of broad cross section of Alabama's black population.

⁸² Kelley, 114.

⁸³ Ibid., 114.

Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe* is an excellent example of how contemporary scholars have built upon the work of Philip Foner while simultaneously challenging some its underlying principles. Like Foner, Kelley is drawn to interracial communist organization as a hopeful counterpoint to the bleak history of organized labor and the black worker. They both celebrate the history of left politics and trade unions in actively organizing black labor and mobilizing around social struggles for state protections against lynching and other forms of racial violence. In contrast to his later works, Kelley's first book, which is based on his dissertation, seems in a direct line of Marxist inspired histories of black workers. However, his concern with internal dynamics of the black community is a striking point of departure from Foner. Like Hunter, Kelley recognizes the power of black cultural institutions to shape formal and informal labor organization, as well as the existence of a life outside of work. This approach represents a shift from the history of structural exclusion to the focus on the agency of its victims to fight against and transform existing circumstances through cultural practice. In his prologue, Kelley explains that, "The movement's very existence validates literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's observation that a culture is not static but open, 'capable of death and renewal, transcending itself, that is exceeding its own boundaries.'"⁸⁴

* * *

A new body of scholarship is emerging that is able to provide a multi-faceted approach to the study of black labor. To some extent, this literature reflects larger trends within the American academy including, gender studies, social history from the bottom-up and an emphasis on the central role of culture in shaping political and economic

⁸⁴ Ibid., xii.

institutions. Philip Foner's classic *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* has been supplemented by a growing number of monographs which elaborate a variety of themes previously overlooked in histories of black labor struggle. One of the most important consequences of this new academic work is the creation of more sophisticated models for figuring class with race. Too often in the past, black workers have been denied a central role in the American labor movement both by the writers of history and its practitioners. Narrow definitions of labor organization, class, and working-class institutions have obscured their participation. The path breaking work of the young scholars Tera Hunter, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Kevin Gaines has done much to rectify these past silences. Stuart Hall of the Birmingham school has argued that "race is the modality through which class is lived," scholars both within and beyond black studies would do well to heed this call.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Hall, 55.

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