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Michelle Brattain: The Politics of Whiteness

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Introduction

THERE HAS EXISTED throughout the twentieth century, to borrow the words of W. J. Cash, a “profound conviction that the South is another land.” In his influential book *Mind of the South* (1941), Cash argued that the region’s history was a continuous and internally logical progression straight from slavery to modern industrial capitalism. Old South and New, Cash contended, stood apart from the rest of the nation, warped by mistaken notions of progress and white supremacy and by the demagogues who represented them. The failings of workers in textiles, the low-wage industry that dominated the whole region, played a central role in Cash’s “southern mind.” Scarcely concealing his disgust, Cash portrayed millhands as foolish pawns who were duped by boosters, racism, and a naive trust in the mill barons who transferred plantation social relations to the company town. If they participated in politics at all, southern workers were easily distracted from their “real” class interests. By fanning the fears and insecurities of the South’s poor whites, the perennial Ben Tillmans, Huey Longs, and Eugene Talmadges of the South had co-opted working-class unrest and funneled racial antagonism into support for a white Democratic coalition that sustained one of the most rigid and oppressive social systems in American history. Though Cash’s analysis sometimes betrayed a mean-spirited “want of feeling for the seriousness of human strivings,” in the words of C. Vann Woodward, his book anticipated much of the current scholarly interest in whiteness and articulated much of what became the conventional wisdom on class, race, and politics in southern life.¹

This persistent image of southern workers as cheap, contented, and anti-union, recycled by social scientists, journalists, historians, and sociologists throughout the twentieth century, also indirectly shaped much of the “new” labor history, and scholars who hoped to investigate southern workers from a more sympathetic point of view first had to contend with that traditional stereotype. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the publication of several innovative and creative studies of the southern textile working class nearly banished the sacred cow of southern exceptionalism. In those works, southern textile workers emerged as the creators of an authentic, vibrant culture, the shapers of the modern industrial system, the defenders of a more humane moral economy, and realistic political actors inspired

¹ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), quote from vii.

by the events and opportunities around them.² In other words, southern workers emerged as nearly the polar opposite of all that Cash had claimed for them. But with a few notable exceptions, the revisionist project has not addressed the contention by Cash and others that race determined the social order that emerged in the South's largest industry. Nor have many scholars addressed the role played by the working class in twentieth-century southern Democratic politics.³

This book is a study of textile workers, race, and politics in the twentieth century. Though it is not intended to revive faith in southern exceptionalism, particularly not in the caricature of the South offered by Cash, it does seek to restore his approach to southern political, social, racial, and economic history as an organic whole. Cash frequently condemned southern workers' actions as self-defeating, irrational displays of racism. This book, in contrast, seeks to understand not simply racism, but the construction, reconstruction, and manipulation of race itself. In particular, it examines how whiteness—a racial identity and a cultural phenomenon grounded in the unique historical context of the Jim Crow South—shaped working-class history and southern politics in the twentieth century. Workers' advocacy of whiteness was, as Cash implied, tragic and selfish, but unfortunately it was not irrational or unfounded. Whiteness was, and continues to be, a very real determinant of social relationships and material benefits.

My research builds on a growing body of literature in history and cultural studies on the phenomenon of whiteness, or the ways that white racial identity serves as a token of privilege and entitlement, though sometimes unacknowledged, in American society.⁴ This line of inquiry has par-

² The most influential revisionist work on textile workers is Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); for recent reevaluations of southern workers and exceptionalism, see, for example, Robert Zieger, "Introduction: Is Southern Labor History Exceptional?" in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995*, ed. Zieger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 1–13; idem, "Textile Workers and Historians," in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Zieger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 35–59; and Bryant Simon, "Rethinking Why There Are So Few Unions in the South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81 (Summer 1997): 465–84.

³ David Carlton's *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880–1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) and, more recently, Bryant Simon's *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) are important exceptions.

⁴ On the construction of southern whiteness, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Pantheon, 1998). See also the essays in Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). On the impact of this new scholar-

ticular resonance for the southern textile industry, which began, and remained for much of its history, wholly captive to race. Enconced in the unique, paternalistic milieu of mill village welfare, whites maintained exclusive access to jobs in the industry from the 1880s to the late 1960s. At the very time that white southerners were seemingly obsessed with codifying Jim Crow practices and were themselves sorely divided, the cotton mill campaigns created a healing mythology of common racial interests and provided a new institutional form to express racial difference.⁵ Surrounded by seas of rural poverty, textile mills also made a significant material contribution to segregation by creating and sustaining disparities in black and white wealth. Moreover, race was not simply encoded into the structures of employment, nor were the effects of whiteness simply economic. For much of the twentieth century, textile workers lived and labored in a society where every facet of social life was meticulously segregated. Recipients of what W.E.B. DuBois described in 1935 as a “sort of psychological wage,” all white workers received respect, courtesy, and access to public spaces merely for being white citizens of the segregated South. Whiteness also granted whites a special status in the region’s politics. Candidates flattered and deferred to poor whites, validating their participation and indicating their inclusion, if not always their electoral significance, in southern political culture.

DuBois also speculated that the psychological effects of whiteness had served as a smoke screen, hiding from white workers their common interests with black workers. Much of the story that follows here, however, is about why white workers did not in fact share identical interests with black workers. If whiteness initially served, as David Roediger has argued, as a way for antebellum northern workers to come to terms with wage work and working-class status, I argue that whiteness in the South became something that largely determined the ability to become part of the industrial working class.⁶ In the context of southern rural poverty and the general acceptance of wage work by the turn of the century, this did not represent a decline in status. The creation of wage work actually intro-

ship on labor history, see Bruce Nelson, “Class, Race, and Democracy in the CIO: The ‘New’ Labor History Meets the ‘Wages of Whiteness,’” and responses by Elizabeth Faue and Thomas Sugrue in *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996): 351–420; and Michelle Brattain, “The Pursuits of Post-exceptionalism: Race, Gender, Class, and Politics in the New Southern Labor History,” in *Labor in the Modern South*, ed. Glenn T. Eskew (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

⁵ For a insightful analysis of the similar role race played in structuring the iron and steel industry, see Henry M. McKiven, Jr., *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 700; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 12–13.

duced a much higher standard of living to the rural South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and whites had nearly exclusive access to it.

At the same time, it is clear that whiteness often served to disguise differences in power, status, and control. I am not arguing that white workers were ever as powerful as the southern elites who actually set the limits on political discourse. Nor am I suggesting that they were as contented as southern apologists claimed.⁷ Rather, I am arguing that it would be a mistake to allow an awareness of differences among whites to obscure, or divert scholarly attention from, the advantages that whites of all classes gained from race in the Jim Crow South. Working-class southern whites relied on race to serve as their entrée to politics, jobs, and, later, union jobs. In George Lipsitz's words, segregation gave whites a "possessive investment" in whiteness. Because they profited from the "spoils of discrimination"—in this case, the franchise, jobs, welfare, and status—they had, unfortunately, much to gain in the short term by defining and defending their interests in racial terms. Thus although the history of class formation in the South did not significantly alter existing inequalities between classes of whites, it did leave open the possibility for creating mutually advantageous *intra*racial cross-class alliances among whites. And more significantly, it provided disincentives for *interracial* working-class relationships that would undermine the value of whiteness.⁸

Based on a community study of Rome, a midsize industrial town in northwest Georgia, this book examines how whiteness shaped the class identity and politics of textile workers from the introduction of industrial wage work at the turn of the century to the official elimination of discriminatory employment policy in the 1960s. A primary concern of this book is to examine how workers' culture and politics incorporated, expressed, and contributed to emerging definitions of whiteness. Here my work owes a major debt to historian David Roediger's example, especially his keen analysis of language and folklore and his insight into how seemingly race-blind terms, such as "boss," incorporated and expressed contemporary ideas about race.⁹ Even in the Jim Crow South, I discovered, concepts of whiteness were implicit rather than explicit in much of the discourse on

⁷ Some scholars have emphasized the extent to which whiteness has disguised inequalities among whites. See, for example, Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray, *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, vii; I thank David Roediger for this insight. On the material value of whiteness and its treatment as "property" under the law, see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (June 1993): 1709–91.

⁹ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 65–92.

workers, politics, and policy. The pervasiveness of race often allowed speakers, writers, workers, and candidates to take their audience's understanding of whiteness for granted. Southern workers, the greatest majority of whom never joined unions, left few documents in the archives and even fewer that provide explicit declarations of their racial ideology. At the same time, whiteness, as a historical phenomenon, was an idea that changed over time. Although I have interviewed dozens of people, I am not naive enough to believe that oral histories can overcome the revolutionary changes that have altered the boundaries of acceptable discourse since the 1950s.

On the other hand, armed with the recognition of how whiteness was so often invisible, unspoken, and understood, I discovered that ideas about race were, more often than not, an implicit facet of all aspects of southern culture. Even though southerners in the early twentieth century did not use the term, whiteness was deeply embedded in social relations, politics, and class formation. For example, when white southerners spoke of "the South," they almost always meant, and were invariably understood as meaning, the *white* South. Through a close reading of working-class culture that pays attention to the symbols, assumptions, and ideas that guide it, this book examines these racial dimensions of working-class identity and the contributions workers made to southern racial ideology. From expressions of loyalty to their paternalistic benefactors, to racial designations institutionalized in union contracts, to humor in plant newspapers, I argue, textile workers inscribed and gave meaning to working-class whiteness.

Politics, in particular, provides an important point of entry into the world of whiteness. Although southern politics is ordinarily assumed to be an elite affair, I discovered that working-class notions of racial privilege and labor itself occupied a critical position in the rhetoric of state politics, especially as labor practices increasingly came under the purview of federal policy. And contrary to another aspect of the conventional wisdom about southern politics, ordinary white working-class Georgians also assumed an important role in the practice of popular politics, from the stump speeches they attended, to the issues they elicited, to the ballots they did cast. In spite of their reputation as anti-union supporters of a conservative business elite, Georgia's Eugene and Herman Talmadge often incorporated specifically working-class issues into their platforms and made direct appeals to working-class voters as whites, as workers, even as union members.

White workers did respond to political appeals to maintain segregation, but to dismiss their politics as simply a privileging of race over class is to miss an opportunity to better understand workers and the way southern Democratic politics worked. As Bryant Simon has demonstrated, south-

ern workers' political identities were "a subtle overlapping of multiple identities and ideas about the state, public power, class, gender, and race."¹⁰ As I hope this book demonstrates, the South's single party was an equally complex phenomenon. While southern Democrats clearly never embraced unions over the "right to work," this does not mean they were wholly unresponsive to working-class or union issues. In fact, what is most striking about Georgia Democrats, and the Talmadges in particular, is their remarkable flexibility in accommodating so many white agendas. The southern party's success owed as much to its ability to accommodate an extraordinarily diverse group of white interests as it did to the limited franchise. Despite the general anti-union climate in postwar Georgia, for example, Rome millhands were able to carve out an effective and influential role for themselves in Georgia politics that expressed a distinctly white working-class union perspective.

As a community study, this book has strengths and limitations. I would not make any claim for Rome or its workers as representative of the South.¹¹ For the study of politics, racial ideology, and textile workers, however, it does offer advantages. The format of community study, which provides a way to examine how various elements of a community interact with each other, offers an ideal place to investigate intraracial interactions and the context-dependent meanings of race and class. As a majority-white community whose economy was dominated by several textile mills, Rome also presented an opportunity to compare the experiences of different groups of workers—organized and unorganized, urban and rural, cotton and rayon. Rome's political divisions also provided a unique insight into politics. For much of the twentieth century, the electoral precincts within Rome and Floyd County corresponded to significant social and class divisions among whites, such as union and non-union, and this permits a comparison of various constituencies' responsiveness to candidates and issues. Finally, Rome's history upsets some of the tidiest narratives about southern workers, from the impact of the 1934 General Textile Strike, to the effects of World War II's Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), to the postwar economic fortunes of southern industry. And even within Rome, I found a surprising level of diversity among white textile workers.

Organized chronologically, this book places this history within the context of major events of the twentieth century from the New Deal to the

¹⁰ Simon, *Fabric of Defeat*, 7.

¹¹ In fact, recent studies of race and employment in northern locales suggest that the South's workers had no monopoly on whiteness or preferential hiring. See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

civil rights movement. Several overlapping narratives emerge. First, whiteness played an important role in facilitating the acceptance of industrial development among all classes of whites from the cotton mill campaigns of the 1880s through the 1950s reign of “moderates” such as Herman Talmadge. Although the ideology of boosterism was rarely expressed in terms of race after the New South era, southerners understood development as a project carried out for the benefit of whites that would maintain established racial hierarchies. Race also facilitated southern apologists’ version of paternalism and encouraged many millhands to internalize its morals. This did not, however, necessarily prevent independent working-class actions. How well paternalistic benefactors lived up to this intraracial ideal played a significant role in determining workers’ reactions to such events as the 1934 strike and later organizing campaigns by the CIO. Whiteness and boosterism disguised some of the exploitative elements of southern industry, but because they also made an implicit promise to workers, millhands could appeal to them in ways that served their interests.

This book also examines how racial discrimination in employment, and the occupational segregation that resulted, actually contributed to the very definitions of whiteness and blackness by constantly reconstructing and confirming racial difference. Thus not only did race determine occupation, but in time occupation played a determining role in defining race. Jobs themselves became important tokens of racial identity. The significance of this connection was repeatedly demonstrated in the visual symbols and iconography whites chose to represent race. A third narrative, that of white southerners’ fierce resistance to the encroachment of federal fair employment initiatives under the New Deal, the FEPC, and later the Civil Rights Act, also indicates the centrality of work to the South’s racial order. The story of this resistance and the political support it elicited also provides a unique insight into southern ideas about whiteness and the deep roots of massive-resistance politics.

The central narrative concerns the use that workers made of whiteness. Because textile factories employed whites almost exclusively, the unions that formed in Rome did not initially challenge workers’ commitment to segregation. The failure of race-baiting to prevent union organization, in fact, paradoxically revealed workers’ understanding of their unions as white. Workers re-created racial difference in a labor movement that, until the 1960s, permitted a fair amount of space for segregation. However, the labor movement’s increasing emphasis on both political action and civil rights as elements of the working-class agenda foisted a complex set of negotiations on Rome’s union members. By the time AFL-CIO leaders adopted a more aggressive support of civil rights, the racial culture as well as the political alliances of Rome unions were firmly in place. Although

national labor leaders argued that support for segregationists was damaging to labor, Rome unionists had already learned to work effectively within the South's political system and were not persuaded that such an agenda was inconsistent with unionism as they knew it. Moreover, the general white southern alienation from the federal government in the 1960s was intensified in local union circles by the simultaneity of the government's effective local intervention on behalf of civil rights and its dismal failure to defend the rights of organized labor. What the labor movement had allowed as relationships of convenience in the 1940s and 1950s eventually became forthright local support of anti-government segregationists such as George Wallace in the 1960s.

Finally, this book concludes with an examination of how and when whiteness went underground. When the moral authority of segregation was destroyed by the civil rights movement, defenders of whiteness adopted a new rhetoric of seemingly race-neutral conservatism. Although it was not a direct expression of sympathy for white supremacy, its inversion of "rights" and its premise that current white advantages had been "earned" rather than granted by discrimination proved equally pernicious. A new rhetoric of "qualification," reminiscent of euphemisms for whiteness forged under the regime of the FEPC, soon replaced "whiteness" in the public opposition to nondiscrimination under the Civil Rights Act's Title VII. Rome's civic leaders, unions, and employers proved capable of adapting the race-neutral language of the post-civil rights era, but their communities remained anything but neutral on matters of race.