



THE PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

**RACE AND THE MANAGEMENT
OF LABOR IN U.S. HISTORY**

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DAVID R. ROEDIGER & ELIZABETH D. ESCH

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In memory of

Derrick Bell
(1930–2011)

Troy Davis
(1968–2011)

Stetson Kennedy
(1916–2011)

Manning Marable
(1950–2011)

David Montgomery
(1927–2011)

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Introduction

Race in the History of U.S. Management

MR. BLOCK, THE CARTOONISH ANTIHERO of radical comics in the early twentieth century, had plenty of troubles. The thick-headed Block suffered constant indignities based on his mistaken belief in the good intentions of capitalists, politicians, cops, conservative union leaders, and labor contractors. Ernest Riebe, cartoonist and member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), created Block to be stupid in an instructive sort of way, the prototypical unthinking white worker who had to learn about class to survive. But in supporting an organizing drive among Louisiana timber workers, Riebe not only had to make Mr. Block learn about race but also had to imagine that the antihero might not always be white. In the 1913 Mr. Block strip “He Meets Others,” Riebe shows workers in the Louisiana Piney Woods region as a most diverse group, a fact not lost on the boss. A suit-wearing manager circulates among a group of workers, drawn with slight variations to identify them as being of varied races and nationalities—Anglo-Saxon, Irish, German, Italian, Chinese, Polish, and black. These various others are easily set against one another by the manager. The boss threatens and cajoles them to compete by appealing to masculinity, to fears of joblessness, and especially to their willingness to believe in racial and national differences among themselves. Management-by-race proceeds individual by individual in the comic, suggesting that the idea is to keep competition alive by putting each individual worker on trial, racially and personally. By the last frame in Riebe’s strip, the manager is reclining serenely, successful in getting the men to work frantically while swapping racial slurs among themselves.¹ Riebe shows race management to be crucial not only to the undermining of trade union unity and the lowering of wages but also to the very extraction of production from day to day. The cartoonist hopes that the high-stakes game will end favorably for labor when workers see through the strategy of the boss, but in the short run results are tragic.



Ernest Riebe, MR. BLOCK: HE MEETS OTHERS. Originally published in Ernest Riebe, *Twenty-Four Cartoons of Mr. Block* (Minneapolis, MN: Block Supply Company, 1913), n.p.

Within a left tradition accustomed to simplifying organizing problems by asserting that all workers shared one common experience of exploitation, Riebe pictured management's purposeful use of difference-within-commonality at the point of production. In the Louisiana woods Riebe had in mind in "He Meets Others," another IWW supporter educated workers toward unity as follows: "Trees don't care who fells them.... They make as good a lumber when felled by the hand of a negro [or] a Hindoo ... as when coming from the hand of a white American citizen. The interests of all who work in the woods ... are the same."² For Riebe, such generalizations captured some truths while missing others. He portrayed the manager's insistence on exploiting racial difference as being central to capitalist production and, in the later frames, showed that the perils faced by black and Asian workers carried more dire consequences than those faced by Europeans.

The same acute awareness of the role of race in management found in “He Meets Others” appeared in the more scholarly work of John R. Commons, the labor economist and founder of academic labor history in the United States. In 1907 Commons’s *Races and Immigrants in America* argued that U.S. management had shown just one “symptom of originality,” namely “playing one race against the other.” Commons took a leading part in progressive movements that often celebrated the advances in efficiency made by Frederick Winslow Taylor’s system of scientific management. That Commons could pronounce management-by-race as the nation’s paramount managerial innovation at the very time when scientific management was most lavishly publicized is no small matter, especially as his judgment was intimately tied to direct investigations of factory conditions.³ Commons’s striking connection of the cutting edge of management with the bloody history of race contrasts sharply with the bloodless efficiency of stopwatches and assembly lines that dominate histories of U.S. managerial contributions to history. Indeed, it is Commons’s later glowing assessment of Taylor and of scientific management as “the most productive invention in the history of modern industry” that has prevailed rather than his insights on race management.⁴

Riebe and Commons highlight a historical drama that has until recently remained little investigated, scarcely theorized, and too often unnamed. The Marxist tradition exemplified by Riebe, the studies of labor history begun by Commons, and academic histories of management each have different reasons for letting race management pass almost unnoticed. From *The Communist Manifesto* forward, capitalism has for more than 160 years received credit from the mainstream of Marxism for introducing a “cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.” Marx later argued, “As against capital, labor is the merely abstract form, the mere possibility of value-positing activity, which exists only as a capacity, as a resource in the bodiliness of the worker.” The body, so central to Riebe’s images of management’s manipulation of racial difference, is not absent in Marx, but the emphasis lies on its particularities being overcome by reducing it to standardized movements, on its race yielding to its class. Value arises from making labor abstract, not from accentuating differences among workers. Appreciation of the ability of capital to create a homogenized “world after its own image” has meant that the major Marxist studies of management in the United States have emphasized only the common experience of oppression visible in Riebe’s cartoon. Even such major works on U.S. management as those of Antonio Gramsci, Harry Braverman, and C. L. R. James either ignore racial and national differences or see them as being effaced by the goals of progressive management to Americanize and homogenize workers.⁵ Nor does split-labor market theory, effective in showing racial differences among workers and in some ways usefully derived from Marxism, consistently root racial divisions in production, rather than wages.⁶

Within standard academic studies of labor and management other barriers prevented scholars from seeing and naming race management. Among the foundational group of labor historians brought together by Commons, the belief that “labor” was white and that race was a natural reality rather than a difference made in the world of production cut against any ambitious attempts to pursue Commons’s own insights. When Commons and his associates wrote their multivolume history of labor

in the United States, they told the story of Chinese labor under the heading “class struggle versus race struggle.” The infamous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 became in this view the turning point in all American working-class history, an alleged achievement without which “Mongolian labour” might have “overrun” the country. The assumption that the working class was white informed praise for Chinese exclusion, which was said to have prevented the history of labor from becoming a “conflict of races instead of one of classes.” Such inapt dichotomizing of race and class impoverished serious treatment of both and particularly prevented studies that actually considered how management produced and then relied on differences among workers in an ongoing way.⁷ Mainstream histories of U.S. management fix on its origins during the rise of large-scale industry, and with the advent of a formal literature in which experts describe their empirically based industrial management strategies in the early twentieth century. A southern and western extractive industry like that pictured by Riebe scarcely fits in such a framework, nor do the multiple connections of “He Meets Others” to Southern systems of Jim Crow, to Chinese exclusion in the Far West, and to the brutalities of the plantation and the frontier as foundational sites of race management.⁸

Although our world has not in any simple way become a more cosmopolitan place with less divided working classes, it is now possible to name race management and to tell its story boldly and broadly. Over the past decades, labor historians have begun to examine systematically the managerial use of race to divide workers, especially in Hawaii, in the deep and border South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and within Asian American history. Where critical theory is concerned, what Grace Hong has called the “ruptures of capital”—strategies to make differences among workers pay—now often seem as impressive, calculated, and productive as capital’s universalism.⁹ Such universalism itself has come to be presented as less a truth about modern life than as one strand within capitalist modernity. The economist Michael Lebowitz finds difference so missing from Marx’s *Capital* that he offers a name for what is absent: An “x-factor” has to be introduced as a new variable to help account for capital’s behavior. “X” constitutes “the tendency to divide workers,” an imperative so powerful that pursuit of it potentially leads to the sacrifice of profits in the short term.¹⁰

The most urgent calls for giving race management a name have come from feminist and antiracist scholars working at the boundaries of postcolonial studies and Marxism. Literary historian and theorist Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* insists both on the centrality of class and on the necessity of transcending any tendency within Marxism to isolate analyses of work from the specifically racialized bodies and histories of those performing it. Lowe powerfully demonstrates why Marxism is both indispensable and has been slow to apprehend the “specific history of the United States” where race, capital, and class are concerned. She argues that Marxism has too often stopped at viewing race-making processes like the slave trade and the seizure of indigenous lands as existing only in an early period of the “primitive” accumulation of capital. In the world’s most developed capitalist nation, Lowe maintains, the connection of race and exploitation persisted, driving the accumulation of capital and shaping subsequent strategies of rule. “In the history of the United States,” Lowe

writes, “capital has maximized its profits not through rendering labor ‘abstract’ but precisely through the social productions of ‘difference,’ ... marked by race, nation, geographical origins, and gender.”¹¹

The Production of Difference borrows from Lowe in its conceptualization as well as its title, and attempts to present a history of what Lebowitz calls the x-factor. The dynamics that Riebe portrayed suggest that the history of race management will be elusive at times even in the clearest of studies. The problems in this connection are several. If capital’s goal has been to produce difference and division on the one hand, and interchangeable, standardized motions of labor performed by all workers on the other, the history of race management must include significant emphases on contradictions. Moreover, imagining themselves able to preside over such contradictions required that managers pretend to possess a knowledge of race and of human behavior that they could never have had. Thus much of what *The Production of Difference* describes as emerging in managerial literature is an imagination of control and wisdom by management, an imagination powerfully believed in and acted upon.

Furthermore, the fostering of competition among the races that Riebe and Commons identify as the key to U.S. management strategy turns out to be only one moment in a process that also emphasized the “race development” of allegedly inferior people. Such approaches gave strategies of racial domination a humanitarian spin, for example, during settlement, slavery, and certain phases in the Americanization of European immigrants. Thus not only the content but even the tone of managerial writing about race varied wildly from page to page, from slavery onward. In addition, neither “race” nor “management” refers in the sources for this book to something stable and easily defined. Bosses and academic experts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries defined race in myriad ways. Sometimes they posited a handful of races according to broad “color” groupings, and sometimes they named dozens of hierarchically arranged European races, distinguishing among groups we would now call nationalities. Sometimes race seemed a matter of biology, and sometimes of culture, apprehended through religion, dress, accent, names, and place of residence.¹²

Multiple levels of management were all representative of capital. But they were structured in such a way that conflict among managers and sometimes between managers and the owners of the enterprise was inevitable, especially as managerial hierarchies expanded in large-scale units of production. In Riebe’s comic strip, it is not possible to tell if the boss is meant to represent an upper manager or even owner—after all he wears a pretty nice suit—or the foreman providing hands-on belligerence at the lowest level of the managerial hierarchy. While it is true that capital made management as a whole develop a “personality” over and against labor, specific layers of management and individual managers retained their distinct personalities as well.¹³ As Marx described this hierarchy, “An industrial army of workmen, under the command of a capitalist, requires, like a real army, officers (managers), and sergeants (foremen, overlookers), who, while the work is being done, command in the name of the capitalist.”¹⁴ Even those layers do not exhaust the varieties of management. White managers in this study include planters, plantation

mistresses, overseers, women supervising domestic hired help, military occupation forces, foremen, guards of convicts providing forced labor, outside consultants, engineers, captains of industry, and of ships, and more.

Such complexities also provide opportunities to tell the story of race management. Indeed, the conflict between layers of management regarding whose racial knowledge was to be acted upon turns out to be a telling illustration of the drama of how race management proceeded, from overseers and masters in slavery to foremen and scientific managers in factories. Moments of group-based and individualized race baiting as well as those of collective racial development are not randomly distributed occurrences but instead are highly interesting in their timing and their ability to exist alongside each other. Shifts in the definition of racial categorization help to trace how emerging policies, like immigration restriction, impacted what managers saw as their project, given the workers available to them.

In discussing changes over time, this book emphasizes broad geographical coverage through case studies. It focuses on a one hundred year period, roughly from 1830 until 1930. The former date marks the decade of the first appearance of Southern journals that ambitiously discussed agricultural development in relation to the management of slaves. It also coincides with the boom in cotton production made possible by the full opening of lands in the Old Southwest. Beginning not with the northern factory but with antebellum studies on managing slaves underscores how quickly and thoroughly racial and managerial knowledge became entwined. Managers were never outside of the U.S. racial system and in many ways made that system. Further, the degree to which factory management, at various levels, understood itself as possessing racial knowledge connects it to, rather than distinguishes it from, the management of work under slavery.¹⁵

The closing date derives from the implementation of sharp restriction of immigration of the racialized European poor in 1924, giving time for the effects of such restriction to register in managerial thought and practice, but not moving far into the new and very different era of Depression and industrial unionism. Nevertheless, patterns set in these decades reverberate in our time. During World War I and the two decades that followed, management became unable to imagine itself as enduringly able to focus on playing European “races” against each other. It began to “concentrate” race management onto African Americans and recently arrived immigrants of color, especially Mexicans, which muted the discussion of intra-European “race” differences. In 1830, the United States was a second-tier nation in terms of economic power. By 1930, the nation was the world’s unrivalled leader in production. Race management helped to engineer this tremendous shift.

Choosing these chronological parameters is not to suggest that race management did not have a history before 1830. While the management literature produced by slaveholders in the 1830s marks an important change, management of course occurs without being elaborated in journals. In the case of the United States, and the colonies antedating it, such management reflected the processes of settlement, dispossession of Indians, and adoption of slave labor in ways directly and powerfully connecting to race. To understand the habit of managing labor in terms of tribe and race, and of easily accepting that whites should do such managing, necessitates some appreciation

of foundational processes.

As members of white settler colonies and often of slaveholding societies, Americans developed a sense of themselves in large measure by casting their racial and national heritage as making them uniquely suited to manage land and work, and to evaluate how other races might best labor under white managerial direction. Dispossession of Indians, and the “changes in the land” that it entailed and celebrated, were justified by the supposed inability of indigenous people to “husband,” or manage, the resources at their command and conversely by “white” male claims to do so effectively.¹⁶ The “doctrine of discovery” that made colonial projects “legal,” which would be fully elaborated as an example for the world in the U.S. law, decisively linked conquest with management of nature. Thus what legal scholar Cheryl Harris describes as an emergent colonial notion of “whiteness as property” might also be considered “whiteness as management” from its founding impulses forward.¹⁷

Early American management decisions regarding labor likewise centered on what sort (and then on what “race”) of coerced labor was most economical, skilled, durable, efficient, and tractable. After a period in which Indian slavery seemed a possibility, the last century of the colonial period featured cycles of favoring white indentured servants or African slaves. The turn in the late seventeenth century in Virginia to the mass use of slave labor and to laws dividing what came to be called “races,” responded to repeated crises in and conflicts over the management of tobacco production and to the security of the colony. The most intense such conflict, Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, spurred the transition to African labor and to highly gendered elaborations of race as a means of social control, even as it aided the legitimization of cross-class European claims to Indian land.¹⁸

The choice of a slave labor force and the elaboration of ideologies eventually basing such a choice in allegedly racial group differences made for harsh judgments on the culture and abilities of Africans. Such white supremacist evaluations, though fierce, were mitigated by the manifest value of African labor. Combining the unfamiliarity and degradation of imported Africans with a long-standing British contempt for the labor and reason of the poor, planters soon supposed that the Africans they so zealously sought to acquire suffered from “gross bestiality and rudeness of their manners [and] the weakness and shallowness of their minds.”¹⁹ At the same time, the turn by profit-seekers to African labor represented and made concrete a confidence in African workers and their abilities. As assets in slaves accumulated, the tendency of planters to see and realize value in black labor never lost its logic even as theories of African inferiority came to be centerpieces of the defense of slavery.²⁰

Just as whites began to make racial claims to a special capacity to manage other races, and/or the lands they occupied, the exigencies of securing labor in a colonial setting also encouraged managerial decisions that hinged on knowing the difference between nationalities within “races.” Management-by-nationality and ethnicity led slave traders and owners to attempt to discern putative group propensities in Africans to survive and to resist, making such matters measurable and marketable according to the “tribe” of those imported. Recent scholars have elaborated on the planters’ sharp

awareness and valuation of skills that slaves brought from particular areas of West Africa. But the practice was also familiar to U. B. Phillips, who a century ago included in his documentary history eighteenth-century evidence of South Carolinians' preference for imported "windward and gold coast negroes, who have been accustomed to the planting of rice." Phillips also featured an 1803 guide for sugar planters that, for example, reported (and imagined) Senegalese imports as a "handsome race ... in features resembling the whites ... and excellent for the care of cattle and horses," if useless in field labor. The "Congos" "captivate the eye by their appearance and the ear by their humor." Iboes, the guide judged, were truculent, stubborn, and "much addicted to suicide" but withal "hardy and susceptible to labour, the women in particular." Often this claimed wisdom barely rose, as historians Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan remark, even to the level of "shallow stereotypes," and experts in Brazil, Jamaica, and the American South reached different and changing judgments about the same groups. Nonetheless, this alleged racial knowledge was rehearsed, acted upon, and connected to the management of plantations over long stretches of time. Sometimes it could claim to make "choices on long experience and a considered understanding ... of various African nations." Planters also cultivated and shared knowledge on how to specifically manage the newly arrived African.²¹

To some extent, the need to people the vast landscape being "scoured," as Benjamin Franklin put it, also energized debates over which "races" of Europeans should be attracted to the colonies. Franklin himself was capable of diatribes against the "swarthy" peoples of Europe, among whom he included the Spanish and Italians, but also at times the Germans and even the Swedes. The threat of domination by German immigrants to Pennsylvania particularly preoccupied Franklin, who feared they would bring changes in language and culture but also in "complexion." However, Franklin balanced such judgments against a commitment to settler colonialism and economic development. He added that the Germans "have their Virtues, their industry and frugality is exemplary; they are excellent husbandmen and contribute to the improvement of a Country," and he therefore could not countenance "refusing to admit them entirely to our Colonies."²²

The founding industry of the colonies—transport—anticipated the modern workplaces in which an astonishing variety of the world's peoples, in various degrees of unfreedom and statelessness, performed hard and drudging labor. By the end of the colonial period, one sailor in six was African or African American, with even the crews on slave ships including Africans as labor as well as cargo. Demand for maritime workers, military and otherwise, made the seagoing proletariat likewise include large numbers of other non-European hands and of European workers on board as a result of having been kidnapped or "impressed" into service. Black sailors existed in rough, if diminishing, equality with other shipboard workers, but they were also heavily slotted into service jobs and kept out of positions of authority. After the American Revolution, nationalist, mercantilist, and racialist regulations further made the sea a place of restriction as well as opportunity for workers of color.²³

With the need to manage successful military and commercial alliances with some Indians against others, a similar tendency to make discriminating, if shifting, judgments about the merits of various native groups also appeared. Within the fur

trade, assessing the abilities and fostering the willingness of specific Indian tribes and individuals to organize and defend the gathering and transport of vast quantities of product defined successful management. The skills of mountain men in such trade hinged as much on their knowledge of, and networks of relations with, specific Indian groups as on any other attribute.²⁴

In the early national period, such racial judgments coalesced into the idea that a small group of “civilized tribes” might develop racially as they proved their capacity to husband the land (and sometimes to manage African slaves) in settled agriculture. But a blanket urge to see Indian people generally as impediments to progress and to remove them to beyond the Mississippi was increasingly grounded in race. The focus of early national debates over Indian civilization, and then over the brutalities of Indian removal, emerged most dramatically in the slaveholding Southwest. As historian Daniel Usner reminds us, fantasies of a primitive male-dominated “hunter state” among Indians allowed elites to regard the attempts by white mountain and backwoods people to resist commercial agriculture through hunting as reverting to “the temptations of savagery.” Thus “whiteness-asmanagement” implied the need for poor whites to manage themselves and for men to manage women in ways allegedly setting white “civilization” apart from the supposed gender brutalities of the imagined “hunter state.” To be fully white was to manage, intimately and expansively, before 1830.²⁵

In tracing the further history of whiteness-as-management, and of the production of difference, the book’s first part elaborates the detailed ways that slave masters described race and plantation management in antebellum journals such as *De Bow’s Review* and *Southern Cultivator*, in debates over whether to use “white” (often Irish) wage labor or enslaved African labor, and in day-to-day plantation management. Three themes of consequence for this book emerge in the discussion of slavery. First is the extent to which masters and overseers made different and competing claims to racial knowledge they insisted was crucial to managing. The second theme concerns how race was sometimes used, especially in industry, as a way to “play” groups of workers against each other. It also served to justify the entire labor regime, by promising that it was the best, or even only, way to effect the racial development and uplift of the African workers involved. This bifurcation of “race management” into racial competition, on the one hand, and race development on the other, recurs in other places and times, making an irrational system also flexible and enduring. Finally, a persistent obsession with constructing ratios of productivity of workers of one race versus those of others appears during slavery and recurs consistently after it.

The second of the book’s parts moves the story to the postbellum period and to the west. It analyzes the management of labor involved in building the infrastructures of U.S. expansion both continentally and beyond, and it shows how fully transnational the U.S. “symptom of originality” proved to be. Not only were racialized laborers imported into the U.S. West but also American managers and engineers claiming to possess racial knowledge moved into the Pacific Rim and the world. The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad is a story of intense racial competition. Race management in this instance not only enabled management to drive laborers in some of the most dangerous working conditions in U.S. history but also informed the

engineering calculations regarding safety, especially for Chinese workers. The second case study of this section focuses on transnational mining engineers who conquered the world for informal U.S. empire after 1890. These men marketed internationally a presumed knowledge of race they had gained in managing mines in the U.S. West. Herbert Hoover, in particular, made racialized ratios of productivity a hallmark of his engineering work. He combined attention to the efficacy of racial competition and the possibility of “race development,” and explicitly discussed the savings on safety measures that could occur when nonwhite labor was employed. Material on management of labor and management in the occupied Philippines and in Panama reveals the racial-strategies preoccupation of those managing formal U.S. empire.

The book’s third section treats the coexistence within factory management in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of highly rationalized and seemingly “raceless” scientific time-and-motion studies with a sharp awareness of racial competition in the managerial literature. The absence of much actual close study of race and labor by outside experts left much of the “foreman’s empire,” resting as it did on presumed knowledge of the immigrant “races,” intact. Racial managerial knowledge was often tantalizingly close to being systematized, but it remained more effective if informally wielded by lower managers who hurried and pushed workers, and often hired and fired them. At the same time, racial development of eastern and southern European immigrants was sometimes trumpeted.

The immigration declines after 1915, culminating in immigration restriction in 1924, ended the possibility of playing European races against each other by the dozens. Management so feared the rebellious immigrant working-class militancy that erupted during and after World War I that it questioned the wisdom of such a wholesale system of race management and largely acquiesced in the restriction of immigration. Race management narrowed its sights to focus at times on consideration of blacks and Mexicans coming in unprecedented numbers to factories and to “factories in the fields.” Foremen still managed existing European nationalities but in smaller numbers and, by the 1930s, in the face of strong countervailing powers of industrial unions. Thus race management came to be both narrower and more concentrated against workers of color, surviving to see a renaissance of mass immigration in our time.