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The New Labor History and the Historical Moment

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Herbert Hill's revision of Herbert Gutman's essay, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of their Meaning, 1890-1900," represents a useful tonic in labor history, for Hill challenges Gutman's writing of history in this particular instance as well as his role as a pioneer in the revival of labor history since the 1960s.

Gutman's article, drafted in the mid-1960s, describes the career of Richard Davis, a black organizer for the United Mine Workers of America during the 1890s. Leaning heavily on Davis's published letters to the *UMW Journal,* Gutman shows Davis as a full-fledged member of his union, for the most part respected by white and black miners alike, but aware of considerable racial tension in the workplace.

Gutman's Davis is a man in the middle, walking the line between racist white miners and separatist black miners, seeking and finding allies—well-intended whites and union-minded blacks—in the union. Davis died young and blacklisted, his poverty, for Gutman, an indication of Davis's devotion to a predominantly white union that was able to discern the need for American workers to organize across racial lines. Gutman's Davis stands out because he reached high office in the international union and wrote a series of letters that were published in the union's newspaper, but Davis's importance is more than merely individual. In Gutman's hands, Davis symbolizes a broader and important phenomenon—the recognition of black leadership in the UMW at the turn of the twentieth century. Gutman concludes that the existence of hitherto unknown black UMW organizers such as Davis is crucial to a correct understanding of the age of Booker T. Washington and Samuel Gompers. Here was a decent, although buried, labor history that showed that the mid-twentieth-century American Left might discover historical antecedents as inspiring as the revolutionary European working classes who were becoming the talisman of the American New Left.

Hill attacks Gutman's history of Richard Davis as purposefully misleading, on the ground that Gutman so tampered with the evidence as to produce an untruthful piece of history. Using Gutman's

main source, the *UMW Journal,* Hill shows the deep racist contempt in which the white UMW leadership held Richard Davis, even in his heyday. For Hill, the UMW was little better racially than much of the rest of organized labor even when it had a heavy black membership and just as bad after 1900 when black membership declined. Hill demolishes Gutman's racially egalitarian UMW structure. Instead of being a man in the middle, as in Gutman's essay, Hill's Davis is a victim of the UMW's racist white leaders, who at the turn of the century turned more and more towards jingoism and racism. It was not an accident, says Hill, that Davis died broke and alone. While the UMW allotted pensions to broken down white organizers, the white leadership abandoned Davis, as it had abandoned what little commitment it had had in the early 1890s to racial openness. Hill contends that Gutman ends his essay in 1900, not because it was the year of Davis's death, but because after that time the UMW became too much of a denial of the portrait that Gutman is trying to paint. Gutman's very periodization becomes part of the indictment. Had Gutman extended his analysis, says Hill, he would have had to contend with an out-and-out racist organization that would have reinforced every notion that Gutman was trying to disprove.

Hill's second main point is historiographical: He blames Gutman for having denied the importance of race and racism in the American working class and for having set a pattern that still prevails in what is called the new labor history. This distortion of labor history, particularly of the role of African Americans as working people, becomes the fault of Herbert Gutman.

The main task of Hill's article is the revision of Gutman's history. Using Gutman's own sources, among others, Hill cites particular instances—edited letters, misconstrued editorials—to show exactly where Gutman omitted ugly realities. In this part of his undertaking, Hill is entirely persuasive. Although his portrait of white racism in the labor movement is familiar and convincing, the figure of Richard Davis does not succeed quite so well. Reducing Davis to victim status, Hill makes Davis more of an object and less of an actor, and Hill does not try to explain why a black man would have committed so much energy to building so racist a union or to keeping other blacks in it. Davis becomes an object of pity rather than a man of good judgment who could see the greater good for black workers. Beyond the portrait of Davis, however, Gutman's scholarship fails Hill's relentless testing, so that UMW emerges as part of a white American working class that took its white skin privilege more to heart than any version of interracial labor solidarity.

If Gutman's history does not stand up, what of his role in recent labor historiography? Here Hill omits much that needs to be

included before Gutman may be correctly positioned. For Gutman's role in the tradition of labor history and in Afro-American history far exceeded his record of publication, which includes *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom,* a classic in Afro-American history that cannot be overlooked.

Nor should Gutman's role as a teacher be disregarded. Like David Montgomery, whom I will take to task below, Gutman led seminars in which Afro-American history was central. He also met with graduate students like me, who were not his own, midwifing dissertations in black studies out of departments lacking specialists in this new field. In the early 1970s, his was one of the very few voices heard in the Ivy League that claimed that black history is a worthwhile undertaking, that black people are full-fledged working people rather than a sort of underclass not good enough to be taken seriously as workers, and that our work could be taken seriously as history. These may seem small matters now, but at the time they meant the difference between being able to concentrate on working-class black people as history or not. No matter how seriously Gutman's own research may be undermined, his role in forging the field of modern Afro-American history remains central. But this is not quite to answer Hill's accusation of Gutman's pernicious role in labor history.

The new labor history has a race problem, true, but Herbert Gutman is not its best/worst representative. Much of the new labor history has downplayed or completely overlooked racism, and for years I have been nipping at the heels of some of the best-known, if not the greatest offenders, David Montgomery and Sean Wilentz, insisting that their writing as well as their teaching needs to recognize the ugly American fact of racism, and not simply as a problem for non-whites or a minor theme in American life.

Before the publication of his recent and widely-praised book, *The Fall of the House of Labor,* David Montgomery had written a great deal celebrating the machinists as the embodiment of the fine American republican tradition, without mentioning that they were ardent lily-whites whose union's constitution prohibited black membership until 1948. The new book begins to remedy this great failing by recognizing that the history of workers of color in the United States cannot be understood without taking racism into account. But this does not suffice, as in the case of a very good but flawed study by Sean Wilentz. In *Chants Democratic* Wilentz makes a hero of a labor leader who is a racist and anti-semite. Mentioning racism virtually in passing, Wilentz fails to imbed race in his analysis, which, given the central place that racism occupies in American culture, is necessary in labor history as in much of American studies. The weak class

identity of American workers (and the concomitant weakness of class-based appeals like socialism) cannot be understood without setting racism in the middle of the analysis. Neither Montgomery's late nineteenth and early twentieth-century industrial workers nor Wilentz's antebellum New York workers make sense when their contexts (in their social as well as economic aspects) are distorted through the deletion of black workers and white racism.

The pretence (itself a form of racism) that race and racism do not exist as important categories of analysis is much older than Herbert Gutman, the new labor history, and anyone presently at work in the field. The manifest destiny historians of the nineteenth century like George Bancroft, the economic determinists of the early twentieth century, such as Mary and Charles Beard, and the more recent New Left historians infatuated with English and French scholarship all succumbed to the temptation to clean up American realities. White Americans, historians included, have sought so long and so hard to avoid acknowledging the existence of blackness and racism that I would be hopelessly blind to believe this temptation a thing of the past. The new labor history, however, came out of a particular historical moment that has receded, to permit a longer perspective on both the commonplaces of 1960s radical student culture and the important but incomplete applicability of French and English theorists of labor to American realities. Labor history, like any other intellectual undertaking, is not self-correcting. Sharp criticism like Herbert Hill's is necessary if the familiar American weakness, the wish to deny part of the truth, is not to prevail indefinitely.