

# The Color of Politics

by Aaron Brenner

Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1997), \$19.95 paper, 404 pages.

The idea that the United States is an exceptional nation is as old as the country itself. Most variants of this concept trumpet the special uniqueness of America. Chauvinists from Hector St. John de Crevecoeur to Alexis de Tocqueville to Theodore Roosevelt to Louis Harjo to Newt Gingrich have portrayed America as an expansive and inclusive democracy, an efficient and flourishing economy, and a superior and exemplary civilization, alone in a world either corrupted by Old World aristocracy, blighted by uncivilized hordes, imperiled by totalitarian Communism, stifled by big government, or contaminated by miscegenating multiculturalism. In every case, a supposedly exclusively American trait—diversity, religiosity, local democracy, individualism, liberalism, social mobility—has set the nation apart from, and above, all others.

Of course, variants of American exceptionalism exist on the left too. Here, America is unique not for what it is, but for what it lacks: a socialist tradition, a labor party, and/or a strong labor movement. Many of the characteristics that chauvinists celebrate as evidence of American greatness are precisely those that left critics lament, and cite as the reasons America has no socialism—the lack of a feudal past, individualism, liberalism, religiosity, the frontier. Yet the left often adds another item to its balance sheet of American

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exceptionalism: race. The argument is straightforward: the American labor and socialist movements have been crippled by the racial divisions within the American working class. It seems undeniable, yet few explanations of American exceptionalism (why there is no socialism in the United States) have made race so central to their analysis as Michael Goldfield's *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics*.

For Goldfield, racial division has been *the* Achilles' heel of the American left, "the key to unraveling the secret of American exceptionalism." (p. 30) Indeed, race has been "much more." "Race has been the central ingredient, not merely in undermining solidarity when broad struggles have erupted, not merely in dividing workers, but also in providing an alternative white male nonclass worldview and structure of identity that have exerted their force during both stable and confrontational times. It has provided the everyday framework in which labor has been utilized, controlled, and exploited by those who have employed it. And race has been behind many of the supposed principles of American government (most notably states' rights) that are regarded as sacred by some people today." (p. 10)

To make his case for the centrality of race in American political development, Goldfield reinterprets American political history as a series of crucial turning points, historical intersections at which race set the direction of politics and from which the system of racial domination was created and perpetuated (albeit in continually altered form and content). These turning points were the late seventeenth-century creation of racial slavery, the American Revolution, the Civil War and Reconstruction, the "System of 1896," and the Great Depression and the New Deal. Heightened class conflict characterized each turning point, creating real opportunity and often real progress for black and white workers. Yet, in every case, racial division determined that the ruling classes would ultimately triumph over the working classes.

Throughout his retelling of U.S. history, Goldfield places the interplay of race and class at the center of his story. In his introduction, he critiques attitudinal, psychological, and cultural explanations of race, and insists upon "the class and economic roots of racial formation and systems of racial oppression." Then, as he works through the history, he tries to expose these roots and the poisonous fruit they ultimately sprout. He does a magnificent job sketching the class context—the balance of class forces—in which each of his critical political struggles take place, setting each successive contest

within the race and class configuration left by the previous struggle. Then he demonstrates in devastating fashion how various economic and political elites mobilized racial division in support of higher profits and their own social and political power. Finally, he shows how the outcome of each struggle—always lost by the working class, particularly the black working class—reconfigured and reinforced the systems of racial and class domination.

Because most of his own original research is on the period since the Depression, Goldfield draws on the best materialist social and political history for his arguments in the five chapters that cover the three hundred years prior to the Great Depression. In almost all cases he is well-served. For example, Edmund Morgan, Theodore Allen, and Barbara Fields have persuasively argued that the system of racial slavery emerged out of the class conflicts between colonial Virginia tobacco planters and their predominantly white indentured servants, not from the racist minds of English settlers. Planters switched from white servants to black slaves as a means of social control of their white workers—a classic example of divide-and-conquer. By differentiating legally and socially between white and black labor, something they had rarely done before the emergence of class conflict in the 1670s (much of it interracial), the planters divided the work force, created a white identity, and used that identity to establish a “social buffer between the ruling classes and the most exploited laborers” (p. 43). As a result, within about a decade from the mid-1670s to the mid-1680s, the Virginia work force had been transformed from two-thirds white servants to two-thirds black slaves. In the process, the meanings of blackness and whiteness were created in America.

Having established the origins of race and racism, the rest of Goldfield’s sweeping history focuses on the evolution of race and class, the constant and intertwined reconfigurations of white supremacy and ruling-class power. The struggles of the working classes, black and white, constitute the heart of the story, but so, too, does the political and economic power of elites. In Goldfield’s story of the American Revolution, which draws mostly on the writing of Jesse Lemisch, Marcus Rediker, and Donald Robinson, working-class mobs, often interracial and composed of seamen, artisans, journeymen, and even slaves, constituted a real force pushing the emerging nation toward anticolonial rebellion. The working classes even shared the struggle over who should rule at home once they had helped win the battle of home rule.

Because he is so keen to stress the role of race, Goldfield stresses the role of seamen, one of the very few interracial workforces at the time, while ignoring far more influential lower-class struggles like Shays' Rebellion and the bread riots in Philadelphia in the 1780s. In any case, the planters and merchants who led the fight against the British wielded enough power and influence to win ratification of the Constitution, thereby committing the nation to racial slavery and bourgeois rule. That the American working class, black and white, was formed under these two yokes determined much of the outcome of subsequent struggles—the failure of the Civil War and Reconstruction to achieve an interracial redistribution of economic and political power, the inability of labor and Populist struggles to prevent the imposition of Jim Crow, the failure of the Congress of Industrial Organizations to build viable interracial unionism and organize the millions of black and white workers in the South, and the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to alleviate the disproportionate economic suffering of African-Americans.

In explaining the major events of American political development, Goldfield pays close attention not just to class and race, but to party. His interest is to explain the sustained power of the American ruling class in both its economic and political forms. In addition to divide-and-conquer strategies, elites mobilized the rhetoric of equality, democracy, and justice to enshrine governmental principles and structures that perpetuated racial and class division. Federalism gave localities and states the ability to violate the civil and economic rights of black workers under the guise of local democracy. The structure of the Senate, justified by the principle of the equality of states, gave disproportionate power to Southern Senators and allowed them not only to maintain their regional racist course but to commit the nation to the same path. Such principles and structures legitimized the racist practice of American political parties, most obviously in the long history of the Democratic Party in the South. They also delineated the boundaries of rhetoric and program within which national and local political debate took place, the terms black and white workers would have to use to make their political claims. Even today, as Goldfield shows, national politics is still dominated by a white racist coalition in which both parties use thinly veiled racial appeals to attract votes. Whereas the rallying cry used to be states' rights, today white politicians win elections by railing against affirmative action, welfare, and immigration. In each case, a supposedly democratic principle—equality of opportunity, merit, national/cul-

tural integrity—is mobilized in the cause of race (and class) oppression.

With his discussion of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Goldfield introduces the organized labor movement, showing conclusively how it failed to recognize the political imperative and potential to organize black labor in the South during the decades after Emancipation. What Goldfield generously labels “obtuseness, neglect, [and] ignorance” (p. 138) toward black workers has characterized the American labor movement during its entire history. Of this there can be no doubt. But is racism to blame for labor’s infirmity? This question is the key to Goldfield’s argument.

In each of his turning points, he demonstrates how elites mobilized race to protect their political and economic power. He is particularly persuasive (following V. O. Key, Ira Katznelson, and others) in demonstrating the political power of the Southern ruling class and its ability to impose racist policy on a national basis. Yet why do white workers and their unions follow along every time? What explains their “obtuseness”? Why did Southern white workers ultimately abandon interracial populism for white supremacy and Jim Crow? Why did the Socialist Party only offer “benign neglect” (p. 171) toward black workers? Why did white workers accede to the CIO’s retreat from racial and class militancy? These questions are particularly difficult, since, as Goldfield shows, such “neglect” often ran counter to the material interests of white workers. For example, he dismisses the notion that white workers achieve any real, long-term benefit from racism by arguing that the failure of white workers to unite with black workers in the South is largely responsible for their lower wages. Rather than gaining from racism, they have been hurt by it. So why do they do it?

Goldfield never makes working-class consciousness a central theme of his argument. He never investigates rank-and-file activity or attitudes, so his answer is never complete. But he does provide quite a bit of evidence to suggest that working-class racism is the result of weak class consciousness and a feeble labor movement. This first becomes apparent when he discusses the potential for the abolition of slavery during the democratic upheaval of the Revolution: “If abolition were to have come at the time of the Revolution, it would have had to be pressed more fully by the lower classes rather than the elites. Yet, their forces were ultimately too weak and their class demands on many other issues as well as emancipation were not well enough defined or forcefully enough presented to be a major

factor in the outcome of important policy debates.” (p. 67) In other words, because Revolution-era working classes lacked unity, consciousness, and power, they could not and would not fight for abolition.

This link between class weakness and racism becomes even more clear in Goldfield’s discussion of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, particularly in his deft and devastating critique of the CIO leadership during the 1930s and 1940s. This analysis of the CIO, developed more fully elsewhere (in Goldfield’s previous articles and a forthcoming book on Operation Dixie), forcefully and, in my view, correctly challenges virtually all of the historical literature on the subject, and it is the most compelling part of the book.

As he shows, the CIO, from its beginning, combined “broad class, insurgent, solidaristic perspectives” with “narrow, cautious, racially divisive, sectoral approaches.” (p. 220) On the one hand, its left-led unions, including those in packinghouse, food and tobacco, farm equipment, metal mining, maritime, transport, and longshore, often employed innovative tactics and insisted on interracial organizing. These unions were hardly perfect, often vacillating on both race and class questions. Yet within the CIO wing of the labor movement, they generally exhibited the highest degree of race consciousness, often putting the particular needs of black workers—such as equal wages and job upgrades—at the forefront of the list of demands. They also demonstrated the highest degree of class consciousness, insisting on the inevitability of class conflict, the necessity of rank-and-file mobilization, the utility of union democracy, and the centrality of left-wing political activism. Within the opening created by the critical turning point of the New Deal, they represented the best hope for racial equality *and* working-class power.

On the other hand, the CIO contained unions that, if they had ever used innovative mass tactics, quickly abandoned them in favor of bureaucratic and corporatist strategies. Such unions, including those in auto, steel, rubber, garment, and textile, pursued regulated relations with employers, one-party internal union politics, and a close relationship with the Democratic Party. Accepting the help of employers and the government, these business unions came to dominate the CIO, with dire consequences for the labor movement in general and black workers in particular. As Goldfield summarizes, “it was the growing domination of this conservative thrust that was to undermine the power of the labor movement and stall the po-

tial for a more thorough racial transformation.” (p. 220) Furthermore, the dual retreat of the labor leadership—from class and racial militancy—paved the way for the eventual decline of the labor movement and prevented the civil rights movement from becoming a more general working-class movement.

In another important and innovative analysis, Goldfield demonstrates how the mobilization of black workers during the 1930s and 1940s prepared the way for the civil rights struggles in the 1950s. This mobilization highlighted the failures of the labor leadership to consolidate and extend the gains of the 1930s and 1940s. The CIO’s weak and racist attempt to organize the South in Operation Dixie, its support for the Democratic Party still burdened by Southern racist leadership, and its pursuit of labor peace all weakened the ability of black workers to expand their civil rights struggles, reduced the possibility for interracial political mobilization, and legitimated the white backlash that characterizes present-day American politics.

Goldfield’s analysis of the CIO seems to suggest that its poor record on race is the result of its weak class consciousness. The unions with the best racial practices were the most militant, mobilized, and class conscious. The least militant and class conscious had the worst racial practices. This appears to contradict Goldfield’s own argument that racism is to blame for the weakness of the American labor movement. Instead, his evidence suggests that the weakness of the American labor movement is to blame for its racism.

He makes the same argument when explaining white workers’ support for massive resistance to the civil rights movement in the South in the late 1950s and for opposition to affirmative action today. Of massive resistance, he says, “Without a class-based alternative, lower-income whites were inclined and aggressively encouraged to blame African-Americans for their problems.” (p. 306) On the opposition to affirmative action:

The reason that so many whites can be mobilized against affirmative action is simple. Although cases of so-called reverse discrimination are few, the decline in living standards and the contraction of job prospects for a large percentage of the population are quite real. As has been true historically in this country, the political alternatives are stark. One can attempt to understand the broad economic trends and organize for more justice, greater union organization, and a larger safety net. This puts people in sharp conflict with the most powerful forces in the country. Or one can pick a scapegoat. When collective organization is weak, the latter alternative is the one usually tried. (p. 344)

In a way, this is simple logic. Consider the different levels of class consciousness. Workers who insist upon mobilizing on a craft basis are said to possess a limited class consciousness in comparison

to those who recognize the necessity of mobilizing on an industrial basis. The same goes for race. A truly class-conscious working class would not be racist.

Of course, Goldfield would be right to argue that the system of racial domination gave workers the racist option in the first place, that class and race were mutually reinforcing: class weakness leading to racism leading to continued class weakness. But he does so rarely, for this is not the same as saying that racism is to blame for America's exceptionally weak left and labor movement—a pivotal argument of the book. As a result, on this point, his argument overtakes his evidence.

Goldfield's unwillingness to draw the conclusions from his evidence derives in part from his failure to investigate working class consciousness. Workers' material interests are not "long-term" (socialism) and "short-term" (racism). Nor can their interests be removed from the political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual context in which workers find themselves. Within the American context, racism has been, and continues to be, in the material interest of white workers. It makes sense, not just in the psychological sense of finding a scapegoat to justify their own irrational behavior (the liberal explanation of racism), but in achieving their social and economic goals (whether rational or irrational). In this way, racism, like individualism, sexism, business unionism, or interracial solidarity, is a strategy. Its appeal and efficacy depend upon the ends desired and the obstacles to overcome. These ends and obstacles are shaped by many historical developments, but in America, the intense competition of the capitalist labor market, the struggle for political resources and power, and the fight for social and cultural preservation and dominance, have all made racism a viable and proven strategy. Goldfield is absolutely correct that the lack of a class-based alternative makes racism all the more attractive as a means for (white) group success, an argument he could develop much more. But it is precisely this lack that theories of American exceptionalism attempt to explain. Thus, we are back where we started.

In his insistence on seeing racism as the primary cause of American working-class weakness, Goldfield risks making the same mistake he warns against in his introduction: becoming ahistorical. Rather than something that must be explained (and might well be explained by working-class weakness), race becomes the *deus ex machina* that floats through history explaining the successive failures of working-class struggle. He is forced into this largely because he



dismisses all the other explanations for American exceptionalism offered by the left since Marx. While some may be worthy of dismissal, others are not: the historic strength of American capital, the social and political force of agrarians, the power of the American state, and the successive waves of immigration, to name just four. While these historical developments must themselves be accounted for, they help explain the weakness of the American left and how race and racism—along with individualism, sexism, craft unionism, and other divisive strategies—made such an important contribution to that weakness.

In the end, if Goldfield does not explain just what makes the United States exceptional, he does demonstrate that race is an important part of the answer. He convincingly illustrates the centrality of race to American political development. His argument is particularly strong in explaining how “the system of racial domination has been central to the economic interests of an important segment of the U.S. ruling class.” (p. 350) Indeed, the strength of his book is its detailed explication of how elites have created, perpetuated, and manipulated racial division as part of a strategy, conscious and unconscious, for class rule. Goldfield is absolutely right, therefore, to expose the racist hypocrisy of so much of American political rhetoric and practice, and to argue for the importance of racial egalitarianism in any struggle for a just society.



General, your tank is a mighty machine.  
It Shatters the forest and crushes a hundred men.  
But it has one defect:  
It needs a driver.

—Bertolt Brecht