REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

An Outmoded Approach to Labour and Slavery

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Bernard Mandel, *Labor, Free and Slave: Workingmen and the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States*. Introduction by Brian Kelly (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2007, originally published 1955)

This is a book that deserves not to have been reprinted, at least not bearing the freight with which its overwrought introduction burdens it. Its author, Bernard Mandel, a working-class activist with a doctorate from Case Western Reserve University, was an estimable and admirable figure. His 1963 biography of Samuel Gompers remains the best account of the life and limitations of the American Federation of Labor's most important leader, both because of its assiduous research and of its critique of Gompers's racism. That volume remains out-of-print while this relatively slim and unedifying one has been reissued by perhaps the nation's leading academic publisher of labour history. Regrettably the republication appears to be mounted and marketed as an antidote to the alleged excesses of "whiteness studies," a role the book cannot successfully play.

Mandel's virtues make all of this especially lamentable. Apparently – the editor's introduction cannot quite nail down his political affiliations – an independent leftist able to profit from associations with both the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, Mandel's most dramatic transformation occurred as a result of participation in the Black freedom and pan-African movements in Cleveland and then Kenya from the late 1950s through the 1970s. A school teacher and union activist, he helped organize Cleveland's freedom schools in the 1960s and felt so transformed by his activism and changes in his personal life that he announced to the press in 1969 that he considered himself to be Black, figuring race sociologically and psychologically. He moved to Kenya five years later and became an important English-to-Swahili transla-

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tor, making the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, available in the latter language.

This life history, much of it in partnership with the African American educator Althea Warner, is well worth recovering, but its placement before a discussion of *Labor, Free and Slave* in the introduction leaves the impression that the reprinted book is itself the product of deep engagement with the Black left. Instead the book's biggest problem is the lack of such engagement at least on an intellectual level. The transformative civil rights experiences that lead off the introduction occurred after *Labor, Free and Slave* was written. Indeed Du Bois's absence from Mandel's book, and still more strikingly from Kelly's introductory section on race, slavery, and US Marxism, turns out to be a key to the limitations of both.

A much more modest case for reprinting the work would have also been a much more convincing one. Published originally in 1955 by Associated Authors, a cooperative effort of six writers (including the great feminist historian Gerda Lerner) seeking an outlet for their radical works near the nadir of the academic Red Scare, it represents an important attempt to produce radical and respectable scholarship under very difficult circumstances. Moreover, Mandel's experiences as a teacher make the book a fine example of popular, and at times even funny, writing. Describing the practice of using Irish workers in preference to slaves on some dangerous jobs on Southern docks, for example, Mandel quotes the logic that slaves were too valuable to be knocked into swirling waters and he cannot resist slyly adding that the Irish workers "were literally the 'fall guys' for the slaveowners." (35) The study reflects the central assumptions of Popular Front historiography regarding race in the nineteenth century and predicts some of the course of later, and much more academically honoured, research by Eric Foner and others. More than most of that scholarship Mandel's book subtly captures the extent to which slavery was a tragedy – and one setting stages for further tragedies – for all workers.

The study falls into six chapters, beginning with a brief and schematic introduction on labour and abolition, a section that is enlivened by an attempt to quantify the composition of the antebellum working class and the extent of proletarianization. The second chapter, on labour in the disfiguring "lion's den" of Southern slavery, is the book's best, if we allow that it is in fact on white labour, rather than all workers, in the region.

The long third and fourth chapters amount to over half of the book and their arguments seem to have occasioned its reprinting. In them Mandel charts the organizationally complicated course of land and labour reform, and that of abolition, during the thirty years before the Civil War. Effective at times as narrative, their interpretive structure too often lapses into caricatures of William Lloyd Garrison as a doctrinaire, ineffective and unyielding leader whose allegedly anti-labour views alienated (white) workers. The index's subheading under "Garrison" containing the most entries is "narrowness," (250) although the text vacillates between making that charge and regarding him

as too open to a variety of radical causes. Because land reform ultimately so mattered in bringing some workers into opposition to the spread of slavery, the manifold illusions it fostered, the failure of its promises, its flirtations with bourgeois leadership, its ties to property, and its potential to divert attention from point-of-production struggles get something of a free pass.

Subjective factors, especially susceptibility of workers to propaganda from the South, the Democrats and (though Mandel is actually much more careful and brief on this point than Kelly's introduction suggests) the Catholic Church, carry more weight than one might expect in a materialist interpretation. The emphasis on "competition with free Negroes" (251) for jobs is sustained, but given the demographics and results of that competition, not fully convincing as the material context for subjective reactions.

A fascinating section on "chattel slavery" and "wage slavery" (77*ff*) opens a vital area for debate, but ends by falling back on the contention that "blind" middle class reformers like Garrison, abstract and apolitical, "simply could not understand [the] language" (89) critiquing wage slavery. In fact the challenge to loose connections of wage (or white) slavery to chattel slavery was led by Frederick Douglass and other Black, often fugitive, abolitionists. Their challenge was mercilessly concrete. Douglass, who tried out speeches in workplaces before giving them in halls, was far from unable to speak to or hear white workers, but he and William Wells Brown did challenge metaphors regarding white slavery sharply. They noted, for example, that their escapes from slavery had left job openings and wondered if any white workers wanted to take the jobs.

The final two chapters, on labour and the Civil War and then on the immediate post-war labour movement, are slight, with the latter amounting to a postscript. They contain valuable information on trade unions and the war effort and a precocious appreciation of Southern plebeian opposition to the Confederacy, but end in a discussion of the post-war labour movement that settles for emphasizing that white labour had come a long way but not gone far enough. The tone is critical but only within the confines of finding an upbeat and usable past. Molders' Union leader William Sylvis's pronouncements on the necessity for biracial unionism receive much attention. But in the same source Sylvis also details his extravagantly racist opposition to "social equality" between the races, ridicules the critically important working-class demand that freed people be able to serve on juries, denounces direct food aid to ex-slaves as a "swindle" serving "lazy loafers," and assures readers that the Ku Klux Klan did not exist. All of those positions go unremarked.

Kelly's introduction suggests that Mandel's book would require little revision except in "details" in light of writings over the past half-century. Such an assessment overlooks a great deal that has changed and more that ought to have. For example, the book simplistically sets the industry of the North against the agrarian South, holding that the "preponderance" of ruling class opinion in the latter region held that "a slave in industry was already half-

free," [57] a generalization much undermined by the Marxist work of Robert Starobin and others. Women scarcely obtrude on the book, either in considering labour or anti-slavery, and gender is still less present.

A strong case that Garrisonian abolitionism was not hopelessly sectarian, dictatorial, and politically ineffectual has been well-made by Aileen Kraditor and others since Mandel wrote, and the wonderful accounts of Wendell Phillips' life, heroism, and relationship to the working class should make us ask what it is in Mandel's book that makes Phillips so disappear. However ready Kelly's introduction is to dismiss Noel Ignatiev's work on Irish immigrants, it can hardly be said that the work of Kerby Miller, Peter Way, and others has not greatly deepened and complicated our knowledge of that huge section of the proletariat, and their social weight, in ways that take us far beyond Mandel's scattered and one-dimensional portraits.

It is perhaps true, though sad, that the absence of any serious consideration of connections of efforts to make "free" land speedily available to the practice of Indian removal remains almost as unquestioned now as in Mandel's time. That the U.S. developed as a settler colony remains well off the agenda of labour history so that the episodic pronouncements by land reformers of a love of Indian ways, their stated opposition to particular government actions, and even their use of Indian disguise[1] count as evidence that agitation for homesteads had no relation to native dispossession. Although Alexander Saxton's *The Rise of the White Republic*[2] provides a wonderful Marxist astringent on this score, insisting that the free soil elements were ultimately associated with hard anti-Indian racism within the Republican Party, neither it nor Shelley Streeby's research in *American Sensations* on land reform and Indian removal[3] seems to have so far rendered it necessary to regard the fact that *Labor, Free and Slave* discusses land at length and Indians not at all as more than a mere detail.

All that said, the main problem with uncritically reprinting Mandel's study does not lie with its wholly understandable failure to anticipate future directions of research but rather with its failure to engage with the best of Marxism as it existed when he wrote. That is, the main reason that this book seems now so dated is not that critical studies of whiteness have since come along, but that ethnic studies, social movements, and the halting democratization of universities has forced serious engagement with Black Marxist writings from the 1930s and 40s, especially the work of Oliver Cromwell Cox, Claudia Jones, C.L.R. James and, in this case indispensably, Du Bois in his 1935 classic *Black Reconstruction*.

The lack of engagement by Mandel with this body of work is critical as Du Bois's example challenges not this or that about *Labor, Free and Slave* but the

1. See, for example, Mark Lause's otherwise useful but very sentimental *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Champaign, Illinois 2005)

2. London 1990.

3. Berkeley 2002.

very plot that the book assumes. While Du Bois's masterwork focused on the Black worker, and therefore started with a chapter by that name, it immediately followed with a chapter offering the first substantive history of the "white worker," underlining that one story could not be told without the other. Mandel's title, on the other hand, promises to treat both enslaved and waged labour but turns out to really be about white "free" labour and how it viewed slave labour. Labour as a category means white labour in the book, although it covers a period in which more workers laboured for slave-owners than for wages.

Abolitionism is likewise rendered without the sense that its energies in many times and places came precisely from Black activists. It was the fugitive slave, as James observed in the inaugural issue of *Amistad*, who saved anti-slavery from being "sentiment." For Du Bois (who significantly placed his remarks in his chapter on the "white worker") it was the fugitive slave – the "piece of intelligent humanity who could say: I have been owned like an ox" – who "made the abolition movement terribly real." And yet even when Mandel writes about the critical 1850s crises over fugitive slaves he does so with no sense that they were the central working class historical actors of that decade. Although capable of strong, foreshortened passages allowing that African Americans were the most active fighters for their own liberation, *Labor, Free and Slave* could suppose, two decades after Du Bois detailed the critical role of the "general strike" undertaken by hundreds of thousands of slaves in the Civil War, that "the worker" in the South did not "play a decisive role in the overthrow of slavery." (60)

Kelly's introduction is of a piece with the book in this regard. In surveying the range of interpretations and inspirations available to Mandel, it identifies Philip Foner, Herbert Aptheker, Herman Schülter, Anthony Bimba, Marx, Engels, and others but steers astoundingly clear of addressing *Black Reconstruction*, the monumental attempt to put the 1850 to 1880 period in a Marxist framework. Kelly once mentions James's work, in a footnote that finds its critique of Popular Front historiography on race "somewhat superficial," urging Peter Camejo's writings as a superior alternative. (lxii, n.58)

This review should not close without an observation on the posturing that runs through the introduction where the critical study of whiteness and Marxism are concerned. Kelly repeatedly casts the work of Ignatiev and others with whom he disagrees as a "critique of historical materialism" (xxix) or as propagation of the "antimaterialist framework so fashionable at present." (l) Ignatiev and I in fact write as Marxists, as did the late Ted Allen as well as Saxton and Karen Brodkin. Indeed it seems doubtful that any subfield in US history has been so shaped by Marxism as that critically studying whiteness. And yet the introduction holds that it knows what Marxism really is, dismissing even Allen's work by implausibly charging that it merely dresses up "extreme philosophical idealism" and "the moralist temperament of … evangelicalism" in Marxist garb. (xl)

Such practices are all too common and would not be worth remarking if

the posturing in this case did not also conceal a key interpretive difference that Marxists ought to be debating. While trumpeting its own ability to define Marxism, Kelly's introduction makes slight reference to Marx's own writings on the South, preferring to concentrate on the unshakeable confidence that Marx and Engels are erroneously said to have shared – Engels in particular regarded the Civil War as already lost at times – in the inevitable wartime turn to slave emancipation and the fated military victory of the Union. The works of Ignatiev and myself follow in different ways that strain of Marx's own thought that saw large Southern antebellum slaveholders as a capitalist class. [4] When Mandel writes that anti-slavery was "clearly capitalistic in its ideology," (24) he reflects one trajectory of Marxism. Those Marxists seeing the master class as capitalist would instead hold that abolition was a revolutionary movement against Southern capitalism, one contemplating, and in significant measure effecting, the largest revolutionary confiscation of property in the history of humanity prior to the Russian Revolution. It is fine to disagree with this position, but not to settle the matter via excommunications.

4. For some of the argument and citations to Marx, see David Roediger, "Precapitalism in One Confederacy: Eugene Genovese and the Politics of History," *New Politics,* 13 (Summer 1991), 90–95.