BLACK MILWAUKEE, PROLETARIANIZATION, AND THE MAKING OF BLACK WORKING-CLASS HISTORY

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A pioneering effort to understand working-class African Americans as historical agents, *Black Milwaukee* situated the Great Migration within an ongoing debate over workers' ability to shape the transition from agricultural to industrial society. By joining that debate, Trotter inherited an attention to class consciousness and the significance of work that distinguished the "new labor history" of the 1960s and 1970s, but he also adopted a teleological understanding of modernization that elided historical and geographical complexities of working-class experience. By developing a more flexible understanding of "proletarianization," the author argues, contemporary scholars can benefit from Trotters' theoretical framework without replicating its conceptual blind spots.

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Joe William Trotter published *Black Milwaukee* at a time when U.S. labor history was defined by studies of African American slaves and white industrial workers.[1] The "new labor history" was approaching twenty years old, and it retained the focus on early industrialization and working-class formation that Herbert Gutman, David Brody, David Montgomery, and others adopted from British historians E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. It is unfair to argue that the new labor history ignored race and African Americans. Gutman's earliest work acknowledged the need to account for race when applying Thompson's model to the United States, and his most influential monograph was a study of African American family life. Indeed, some of the most sophisticated attempts to apply new labor history to the Americas were to be found in Eugene Genovese and Sidney Mintz's studies of slavery. Even those who paid less attention to African Americans, such as David Montgomery and Eric Foner, understood the significance that the debate over slavery had for the emergence of white working-class consciousness in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there remained a racial blind spot in labor history, rooted in the fact that African Americans appeared mostly as slaves, rarely as free laborers, and almost never as participants in the process of industrialization.[2]

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That started to change in the late 1970s. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick's 1979 study *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* and Nell Irvin Painter's narrative of black Communist Hosea Hudson examined African American participation in radical industrial movements that previous historians had assumed were all white. Paul Worthman and James Green produced landmark social histories of black workers in the South, while Jervis Anderson and Mark Naison followed Painter's lead in writing the history of black working-class radicalism. The combined effect of those works was to place race and African Americans at the center of what became the second generation of new labor history.[3]

The Great Migration was a logical subject to connect the fields of labor and African American history in the 1980s. Since the 1920s, scholars had compared black migration to patterns established by European immigration in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Sociologists such as Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier built on those comparisons in the 1930s and 1940s to liken black migration to the cultural adaptation experienced by the Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants who settled in northern cities several generations earlier. Historians rejected that comparison in the 1950s and 1960s—pointing out that residential segregation and employment discrimination prevented African Americans from acculturating according to patterns established by immigrants—but they too viewed migration as a lens through which to assess similarities between African Americans and other entrants into the urban industrial United States. The comparison between twentieth-century African American migration and nineteenth-century European immigration was also implicit in the "peasant to proletarian" narrative that Trotter, as well as Richard Walter Thomas, Peter Gottlieb, and James R. Grossman adopted from the new labor history.[4]

The new labor history provided analytical tools for understanding African Americans' changing experiences of work, but it also led Trotter and other scholars to adopt a teleological theory of modernization that had already proven insufficient for understanding other cases of industrialization. Initial challenges to modernization theory came from scholars of Latin America, Africa, and Asia who found that workers in those regions did not fit into categories of "modern and traditional" or "agricultural and industrial" that emerged from earlier studies of industrialization in the nineteenth-century United States and Europe. In a 1977 essay, Daniel T. Rogers argued that such categories were of limited value even to understanding nineteenth-century industrialization. "The uniform experience of newly industrializing work forces, the assumption of global convergence upon Western-style modernity, and the utility of the tradition-modernity polarity itself," he wrote, "have all been seriously questioned by students of social change."[5] Whereas Trotter and others called attention to the chronological and racial specificities of the Great Migration, they often wrote as if African Americans were following an otherwise well-worn path from "farm to factory."

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Despite their theoretical limitations, the initial migration studies paved the way for a blossoming of African American working-class history in the 1980s and 1990s. With their focus on changes in employment patterns and class divisions among urban African Americans, scholars overturned images of economically marginalized and politically powerless African Americans that persisted in journalistic accounts inspired by the civil rights movement. Trotter, Gottlieb, and Grossman revealed that northern industrial employment provided black workers with economic and political resources that were overlooked by scholars who focused only on residential segregation and voting rights. Earl Lewis and Peter Rachleff demonstrated that even in southern cities, African Americans built institutions that reflected their economic and occupational diversity. By 1998, Eric Arnesen observed that the study of race and labor had become "one of the most dynamic" fields of labor history.[6]

The growth of black working-class history facilitated a broader rethinking of twentieth-century African American political history. Whereas earlier scholars traced the origins of the civil rights movement to organizations founded by middle-class urbanites, newer studies found that those organizations remained largely ineffective until they were expanded and radicalized by working-class members. Labor historians revealed even deeper roots of those movements in benevolent societies, churches, and both formal and informal labor organizations built by black workers. As Jacqueline Dowd Hall and Nikhil Pal Singh have demonstrated, that activism lay the basis for a "long civil rights movement" that was rooted in the black working-class activism of the 1930s and 1940s and that envisioned a much broader economic and political agenda than was captured by studies focused on the short civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.[7]

Even as Trotter and others succeeded in linking the study of race and labor, however, they retained a teleological understanding of urban migration, wage employment, and industrialization as components of a broader social process of modernization. Trotter captured the strengths and weaknesses of that model in his argument that black Milwaukee represented a "special case of proletarianization," which he defined as the movement from "agricultural, domestic, and personal service jobs into urban-industrial pursuits." Making explicit the contrast with nineteenth-century industrialization, Trotter clarified that the history of racist violence and exclusion from industrial work meant that African Americans experienced proletarianization as a improvement, whereas "for many white workers the proletarian experience represented a decided decline in status, autonomy, and probably income as well."[8]

Initial reviewers of *Black Milwaukee* criticized Trotter for attempting to fit African American migration into a model that he admitted did not quite fit. Such criticism missed the more important point, however: that the concept of proletarianization carried no more explanatory power for nineteenth-century immigration from Europe than it did for twentieth-century migration from the South. The term retains utility as a label for the process of becoming a proletariat,

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which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels defined as "the class of modern wage earners who, by having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live."[9] Milwaukee's black industrial workers were clearly proletarians, but so were most domestic and service workers—or even many agricultural workers—in both the North and the South.

By the time they arrived in Milwaukee most African Americans had been dealing with proletarianization for generations. Julie Saville, Alexander Lichtenstein, and other scholars have traced the process to the end of slavery, when freed people resisted reliance on wage work by asserting claims over plantation land and, when that failed, by establishing seasonal autonomy through sharecropping. Tera Hunter has shown that black women turned to domestic wage work as a means to establish their independence from former owners and current employers who sought greater control over their bodies and lives.[10] In each case, the important questions revolved not so much around African Americans' ownership of means of production—they rarely had that—as around their ability to influence the terms under which they sold their labor.

My study of the southern lumber industry reveals that African American men often turned to industrial wage work as a means to maintain control over land between the 1870s and the 1910s and that they accepted full-time industrial jobs only after the collapse of southern agriculture dashed their hopes for land ownership in the 1920s. In that sense, African Americans *were* similar to European peasants who had also abandoned their farms for wage employment in the nineteenth century. As in the case of southern sharecroppers in the 1920s and 1930s, agricultural depressions in the 1870s rendered family farming so unprofitable that European peasants frequently viewed industrial wage work as an opportunity for economic advancement. Friedrich Engels observed that land ownership became such a "fetter" that Russian peasants "often run away from it, with or without their families, to earn a living as migratory laborers, and leave their land behind them."[11]

As Trotter's own study made clear, the fact that black Milwaukee was largely proletarian proved far less interesting than the diversity of strategies that African Americans devised to negotiate that city's changing political economy. Even before they found their way into industrial jobs, black domestic and service workers formed lodges, churches, and even labor unions that helped them establish a modicum of control over their lives and their labor. As Tera Hunter found in Atlanta, black women and men established alternatives to domestic wage work in Milwaukee by running small businesses as seamstresses, barbers, and rooming house operators. Entry into industrial employment also expanded the ranks of black service workers, as higher wages increased demand for schools, health care, social services, and retail and leisure establishments that catered to and employed African Americans.[12] Trotter's framework suggests that those evolving employment relations were significant, but it provides no meaningful analysis of workers who fall outside his narrowly defined proletariat.

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Rather than stretching proletarianization too widely, therefore, Trotter erred in restricting the new labor history's insights into class consciousness and occupational mobility too narrowly to industrial workers. The implications of that restriction appeared in a recent symposium in this journal on Arnold Hirsch's book *Making a Second Ghetto*, where Heather Ann Thompson argued that although Trotter focused on the interwar era, his proletarianization model provided a useful corrective for Hirsch and other scholars who portrayed African Americans as passive victims of ghettoization following the Second World War. Hirsch replied that Trotter's analysis made sense for studies of black industrial workers in the 1930s and 1940s, but that "it is difficult to see how it can be sustained as an organizing or analytical principle in light of the last generation's withering deindustrialization."[13]

If we understand Trotter's contribution to be his attention to African American adaptation to their changing relationships to the labor market—and not simply to industrial employment—his framework does carry important implications for the study of the postindustrial era. I have begun research on the expansion of African American employment in urban sanitation, health care, and other public service jobs that coincided with urban deindustrialization following the Second World War. Initially, those jobs paid far less than industrial work, but public service workers launched a remarkably successful and multiracial union movement that won wage increases, social benefits, and collective bargaining rights in the 1960s and 1970s. That movement was most effectively represented by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which grew from sixty thousand to more than a million members between 1945 and 1985—becoming the largest and most racially diverse union in the United States. In addition to providing a vehicle for African American economic advancement, AFSCME also emerged as an important political voice for black, Latino, and white urbanites in the 1970s and 1980s. Growth of the service sector did not counteract the tremendous economic and political damage that deindustrialization inflicted on urban working-class communities in the postwar era, but unionization of that sector indicates that African Americans and other urban workers continued to adapt their economic and political strategies to account for an ever changing political economy.

Joe Trotter's *Black Milwaukee* remains an important model for understanding that adaptation. Just as important, it represents an early effort to transcend the black slave/free white dichotomy that led the new labor history's first generation to overlook the experiences of African American industrial workers. With other graduate students in the late 1970s, Trotter reframed working-class African Americans as primary agents in the creation of African American communities in the urban industrial North. In so doing, they inspired the next generation of scholars to make African American working-class history one of the most vibrant fields of U.S. history. The combined effect of that scholarly interest has been a rethinking of both African American and Labor history

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and a sharpening of the theoretical tools that informed the resurgence of both fields in the 1960s and 1970s.

NOTES

1. Joe William Trotter Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana, 1985).

2. For the claim that new labor historians overlooked race, see Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 24 (1996): 189-208. For an overview of Gutman's scholarship, see Ira Berlin's, "Introduction," in Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York, 1987), 3-69; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972); Sidney W. Mintz, "Slavery and the Rise of the Peasantry," *Historical Reflections* 6 (Summer 1979); 215-42; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality; Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York, 1967); and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970). For more nuanced critiques of race and labor history, see Nell Irvin Painter's critique of Hill in "The New Labor History and the Historical Moment," *Politics, Culture and Society* 2 (Spring 1989): 367-70; and David Roediger, " 'Labor in White Skin': Race and Working Class History," in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays in Race, Politics and Working Class History* (New York, 1994), 21-38.

3. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, 1979); Paul B. Worthman, "Black Workers and Labor Unions in Birmingham, Alabama, 1897-1904," *Labor History* 10 (Summer 1969), 375-407; James Green, "The Brotherhood of Timber Workers, 1910-1913: A Radical Response to Industrial Capitalism in the Southern U.S.A.," *Past and Present* 60 (August 1973), 161-200; and Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York, 1972); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana, 1983). For an early review of the literature on race and labor, see Joe William Trotter, "African American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography," *Labor History* 35 (Fall 1994): 495-523. Unfortunately, little of this early work gained the attention of scholars who attempted to synthesize the new labor history in the late 1980s. See, for example, the essays in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, eds., *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb, 1989).

4. Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley, 1998); Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill, 1997); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1939); and Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* (New York, 1930). For a critique of the comparison between African Americans and immigrants, see Steven Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (New York, 1981); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930* (New York, 1963); Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967); and Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana 1976). Trotter cites their dissertations with his own in *Black Milwaukee*, 279, n. 4.

5. Daniel T. Rogers, "Tradition, Modernity, and the American Industrial Worker: Reflections and Critique," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7 (Spring 1977): 659. See also Frederick Cooper, "Africa and the World Economy," in Frederick Cooper, Florencia E. Mallon, Steve J. Stern, Allen F. Isaacman, and William Roseberry, eds., *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America* (Madison, 1993), 106-7.

6. On the change in civil rights history, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995), 413-41; Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*; Dennis Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany, 1986); Peter Gottleib, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburg, 1916-1930* (Urbana, 1987); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989); Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890* (Philadelphia, 1984); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century*

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Norfolk, Virginia (Berkeley, 1991); and Eric Arnesen, "Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998):, 146-74.

7. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, 2004); and Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233-63.

8. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 238, 1, 237.

9. For examples of reviews, see Kenneth Kusmer, "Urban Black History at the Crossroads," *Journal of Urban History* 13 (1987): 460-70; James R. Grossman, "Making the Afro-American Working Class," *Reviews in American History* 14 (1986): 226-32; and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, 1972), 335, n. 5.

10. Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-l870* (New York, 1994); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York, 1996); and Tera W. Hunter, *To "Joy My Freedom": Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997).

11. William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana, 2005); and Friedrich Engels, "On Social Relations in Russia," in Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 597.

12. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 1-36, 207; and Hunter, *To "Joy My Freedom."*

13. See Heather Ann Thompson, "Making a Second Urban History," 291-97 at 294, and Arnold R. Hirsch, "Second Thoughts on the Second Ghetto," 298-309 at 300, both in Timothy J. Gilfoyle, ed., "Urban History, Arnold Hirsch, and the Second Ghetto Thesis," *Journal of Urban History* 29 (March 2003).

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