

ROEDIGER, DAVID R. and ELIZABETH ESCH. *The Production of Difference. Race and the Management of Labor in US History*. Oxford University Press, Oxford [etc.] 2012. x, 286 pp. Ill. £22.50. doi:10.1017/S0020859013000059

David Roediger (University of Illinois) and Elizabeth Esch (Columbia University) have written an ambitious study of what they call “race management” in United States history, covering a roughly 100-year time period from 1830 through 1930. Using an impressive array of sources, largely written by people whose job it was to manage labor, Roediger and Esch argue that because managers’ goal was to get as much work out of their laborers as possible and at as little possible expense, they developed techniques that varied, given the context within which they were operating, but which also resulted in some key similarities in management practices. In their telling of US history, the racial and ethnic (and to a certain degree, gendered) tensions that have provided the undercurrent of the nation’s history were largely driven by a managerial class that benefited from constantly dividing workers along racial and ethnic lines and by producing extremely contradictory assessments of the quality of the work done by various groups of people.

Whether on the plantation, in the mines, in the lumber industry, while building the railroads, or in meatpacking plants, “cutting edge” managerial techniques systematically exploited differences among people/laborers, were shared in management journals, perfected, and celebrated. In this way, the authors argue against the idea that labor was “abstract” but, rather, that managers were largely responsible for producing what became social differences among people along racial, ethnic, nationalistic, religious, geographic and gendered lines; any divide that they could exploit, they did – with lasting consequences inside and outside the plantation or workplace. Offering new interpretations of the history of slavery, Roediger and Esch detail the ways in which plantation owners, their “overseers”, and plantation mistresses, along with factory owners and foremen all operated within a context that put pressure on them to extract the most work possible from either the Africans they enslaved or the immigrants, Mexicans, and black southerners they employed.

Typically, the agriculturally-based slave labor and the industrially-based wage labor systems are understood in terms of their differences. Plantation owners and overseers developed a complex system that purposely divided slaves by the minutest of characteristics. Factory owners and foremen did the same by exploiting the supposed differences among ethnic groups in the context of late nineteenth-century social Darwinist and eugenicist thinking. Roediger and Esch go so far as to say that the factory system was modeled after the plantation system. The similarities become apparent, they argue, when the managerial strategies in a variety of settings are made central to the narrative.

Also central to their argument, and rooted in the plantation system, is the contradictory nature of managers’ assessments of the work their laborers performed. On plantations throughout the south, plantation owners, overseers, and mistresses at once both extolled the superiority of one group’s ability to excel at a given task and then criticized the same “group” in the next breath for not performing well in some other capacity. Despite the fact that they drew their evidence from agricultural journals that circulated among plantation owners, there was little consistency as to which “group” outperformed others in plantation owners’ assessments. The journals are full of debate about the virtues of varying kinds of African labor and include some discussion about whether to employ Irish or Chinese labor. Africans were preferred primarily because they enabled white

“managers” to display their own innate skills. While Africans were especially adept at hot, heavy work, white, male plantation owners and overseers were considered especially skilled at managing and at developing Africans, considered “imperfected pre-Adamic creations”. And all of this despite reports in the same journals that German immigrant women could pick cotton as well if not better than Africans. Roediger and Esch argue that managers’ contradictory assessments were not only consistent across managerial settings but central to their respective labor systems. Contradictory assessments offered managers the flexibility to better manipulate their work forces.

What remained consistent was the idea that white men were best suited to manage. According to contemporary historian U.B. Phillips, it was the “masterfulness of whites that made security possible”. Roediger and Esch argue that the managerial class was not only engaged in producing social differences among their workers but that they were also concurrently creating the very “white” managerial class to which they belonged. White men, managers argued, were “innately” qualified to manage people. Rarely did managers argue that the people they oversaw had the capacity to develop as far as they had. Laborers could become managers. Managers were able to extract the cheapest and most productive labor from antebellum foundry workers when they “hired” slaves to do the work. When the supposedly primitive Africans excelled at skilled metal production, managers sang not only their praises but their own, arguing that they, as managers, successfully developed them. The problem, however, was that managers’ success undercut the hierarchy upon which the racially driven system was based. Those same skilled Africans were later criticized for being shiftless and lazy.

The authors convincingly argue that the logic developed on the plantation was similar to that employed by factory owners and foremen whose labor force consisted of immigrants from all over the world. Like Africans who were enslaved, immigrants were purposefully recruited for their supposed propensity to do certain kinds of work. In discussing the building of the transcontinental railroad through the lens of “race management”, Roediger and Esch argue that race management in this context enabled foremen to work immigrants hard, expose them to some of the most dangerous working conditions of the era, and “informed the engineering calculations regarding safety, especially for Chinese workers”. White managers knew that the Chinese were especially skilled at blasting and masonry work but preferred to see these as “racial and national traits to be cultivated”, the authors argue, rather than as products of “marketable, modern knowledge”. Whether using Chinese, Japanese, Irish, or eastern European laborers, railroad owners and managers exploited their laborers’ assumed racial and ethnic traits for profit and, as in the slave labor system, to justify their own skill and superiority.

The authors analyze the mining industry similarly, the emphasis here on white managers and immigrants from eastern Europe who were pitted against each other by nationality. They also link race management to the building of an American empire overseas starting with the construction of the Panama Canal and continuing with the Spanish–American–Cuban–Philippine War. Here they provide fascinating evidence of Henry Ford’s production plants in South Africa along with other examples of American business expansion. With regard to the Philippine War, Roediger and Esch quote influential Indiana senator Albert Beveridge who described the US success as “proof of the general rise of ‘English speaking and Teutonic peoples’ as the ‘master organizers of the world’”. The authors base their arguments on an interesting combination of literary works, including those of Herman Melville, Congressional investigations of the use of Chinese and other “kinds” of labor, and on extensive secondary studies of industrial development and empire building in the US.

The last section of the book covers the periods of World War I and the 1920s. Employers were forced to switch to Mexican and black labor after European immigration was restricted. Here white managers had to justify the “switch” after having extolled the virtues of various European immigrant groups in several industries, including meat-packing and steel, over the previous decades. Managers increasingly contended with the power of labor unions that, in Roediger and Esch’s telling of the story, not only developed organizing drives designed to raise wages and shorten hours, but also worked to break through “race management” systems that had instilled suspicion and competition among workers. Prior to the 1930s, only a handful of labor unions were successful in breaking this management system down because the majority accepted a version of race management as “truth” and continued to group laborers as managers had, representing best the interests of white ethnic workers over those of black and Mexican workers. This would change to a certain extent in the 1930s with the dramatic growth of industrial unionism, after which race became the primary dividing line among workers. Business owners and managers then exploited the racial divide just as plantation owners had 100 years earlier to the same ends.

Overall, Roediger and Esch make powerful arguments using management-driven sources to tell the story of American workers. Although there is little to criticize, the authors pay less attention to gender than race. While they are arguing for the importance of “race management”, another book could be written on the ways in which gender played a significant role in managers’ ideas of themselves as “men”. Perhaps more problematic, labor historians and historians of business will find much of the information familiar. At times the book reads as if its authors are repackaging “old” information. Does it matter if we call it “race management” or “white supremacy”? In the end, it does.

What is new and very powerful are the links the authors draw from one managerial setting to the next. Only in doing so can we see the importance of the managerial class in creating the divisions historians more often view as products of social interaction outside the workplace. In Roediger and Esch’s telling of the story, social divisions originated at the hands of business owners, plantation owners, foremen, and overseers while people worked and then carried over into non-work settings.

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MESSER-KRUSE, TIMOTHY. *The Haymarket Conspiracy. Transatlantic Anarchist Networks.* [The Working Class in American History.] University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc.] 2012. ix, 236 pp. \$85.00. (Paper: \$30.00.) doi:10.1017/S0020859013000060

Was there a global anarchist conspiracy in the late nineteenth century? How did the wave of attacks of the years 1880–1900, often referred to as “propaganda by the deed”, come about? Was it the result of individual or small-group initiatives largely unrelated to anarchist organizations and ideologies, or an integral part of the movement’s strategies,