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Materialism and the Persistence of Race in the Jim Crow South

Forty years ago, television images beamed around the world helped solidify the image of the Southern US steel town – Birmingham, Alabama – as a citadel of segregation, a cauldron of racial terrorism and a gruesome manifestation of the ‘collective’ investment of white Southerners in defending the American system of racial apartheid known as Jim Crow. And it was Birmingham’s police chief Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor, directing his Klan-ridden force from inside the cockpit of his special-order, one-man armoured tank, and who famously ordered fire-hoses opened up and police dogs unleashed on civil rights demonstrators, who seemed to many to embody the vicious, ‘solid’, implacable white South’s unbroken commitment to racial supremacy. Connor became an icon of bitter-end segregationism; the courage and determination of the black freedom movement compelled defenders of Jim Crow to make Birmingham their last stand.

¹ Delivered at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 18 November 2003. Brian Kelly was awarded the prize for his book *Race, Class and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908–1921* (2001).

As historians discover all the time, however, things are not always as they seem. This is an especially significant point to bear in mind when approaching the history of the post-emancipation American South, where historians have too frequently surrendered to the assumption that the racial antagonism so palpable in 1963 was an all-pervasive and permanently fixed feature of Southern society. This perspective had been developed into something of a historical axiom by the Georgia-born historian Ulrich Bonnell Phillips in the late 1920s. Phillips was an unapologetic defender of the slave system who argued that the ‘central theme of southern history’ had been the persistence of a ‘common resolve indomitably maintained’ among white Southerners of all classes to preserve the South as a ‘white man’s country’. Phillips’s assumptions were most effectively challenged by the pre-eminent Southern historian of the last half-century, C. Vann Woodward – a liberal of the kind now virtually extinct in American politics, who for all their faith in gradualist reform upheld a genuine commitment to racial justice. Ironically, however, the Phillips thesis has found a new resonance, in recent years, in the work of historians who identify themselves either with black nationalism or the Left.² The materialist interpretation of Southern history, with its ostensibly dogmatic focus on relations of production, strikes some as insufficiently nuanced for unravelling the complex, deeply-rooted psychological motives driving white agency in an era aptly described by one historian as ‘the most violent and repressive period in the history of race relations in the United States’.³

In part, this estrangement reflects an understandable reaction to the ruthless campaign waged against black Southerners in defence of white supremacy during the years straddling the turn of the century. ‘Faced with the obscenity and scope’ of that effort, Jane Dailey has written in her indispensable study of plebeian interracialism in late nineteenth-century Virginia, ‘it [has become] easy to see white supremacy as irresistible’. The view that white racism has been a static feature of Southern life, effortlessly sweeping away all before it, loses sight of the ‘sense of possibility, of movement, that people on the ground [both black and white] sensed’ at various junctures in the evolution of the modern South. ‘The path from emancipation to Jim Crow was rockier than

² For an extended critique of one of the most sophisticated and seminal recent studies sympathetic to a black-nationalist perspective, see Kelly 2004.

³ Litwack 1998, p. xiv.

is sometimes realized', Dailey writes, 'with many detours and switchbacks along the way'.⁴

In tonight's lecture I want to explore, at some length, one of the most remarkable of these 'detours' along the road to the Solid South, and to apply the insight that can be gleaned from that exploration to underline the deficiencies in the 'racial interpretation of Southern history' pioneered by Phillips and repackaged by a new generation of historians. I want to do so by returning to Birmingham, because its evolution in the ninety or so years before 1963 illuminates a great deal about the persistence, or, more precisely, the continual re-invention, of race hatred in the Jim Crow South.

It is more than a little ironic that Birmingham is fixed today in public memory as a symbol of the power and vehemence of white supremacy. It is a town, after all, with no direct connection to plantation slavery, having been founded after the defeat of the Confederacy. It was founded, moreover, as an explicitly modern project; a city that, upon realising its full industrial potential, would stand as a beacon for the ushering in of a new, progressive order that all of the South would emulate. But its reputation as a bastion of white supremacy is even more difficult to square with the fact that there had been not one, but several apocalyptic junctures in Birmingham's development when its leading citizens worried openly that the social order they had so meticulously constructed out of the ashes of the Confederacy's defeat was on the verge of disintegration. In the 1880s and 1890s, in 1908 and again in 1920, local élites faced interracial plebeian and working-class insurgencies that threatened to bring the edifice of racial and class hierarchy crashing to the ground. Five times between 1890 and 1920, black and white Birmingham district coal miners overcame considerable obstacles to mount district-wide strikes against the South's most powerful industrial employers. Twice in the first two decades of the twentieth century, state officials declared martial law, dispatching troops and opening the floodgates to vigilantism in order to suppress strikes approaching insurrectionary levels. The visceral racism that seemed, by the early 1960s, to have become such a permanent and organic feature of city life was, in reality, a historical consequence of these clashes. In this sense, the Birmingham experience is instructive for what it says about the broader evolution of the Jim Crow South: far from being a natural, inevitable feature of Southern society, white supremacy had to be periodically re-imposed,

⁴ Dailey 2000, pp. 6, 156.

or at least reinforced – often at gun-point – to guarantee the continued viability of the social order that Southern white élites had constructed for themselves.

What were the constituent elements of that social order? Some clues as to its main features are embodied in the figure of ‘Bull’ Connor himself. Before he earned a permanent footnote in history as the archetypal bigoted Southern white sheriff, Connor had become a familiar figure among local whites in his role as radio announcer for their semi-professional baseball team, the Birmingham Barons. Less well known, however, is that Connor had his start in law enforcement while working as a mine guard, and later directing the anti-union ‘steel police’ for TCI, the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. TCI had been, since the late nineteenth century, the largest employer in Birmingham’s mineral district: ‘As TCI went’, one observer noted, ‘so went the rest of the district’. In 1907, TCI was itself bought out by US Steel, at the time the largest industrial corporation in the world.⁵

Connor’s tenure at TCI in the 1930s had provided him with solid preparation for the infamous role he would assume several decades later. In the face of the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ (CIO’s) attempts to organise Birmingham’s notoriously non-union steel mills in the 1930s, Connor had been known to hold trade unionists ‘in jail incommunicado for months at a time’. ‘A lot of them just disappeared’, two of his former adversaries later recalled. ‘Nobody knows where they went. . . . [They] just died or [were] killed or thrown in the river or something’. When the Steelworkers’ president Philip Murray arrived in Birmingham to speak before an integrated audience of local steelworkers, it was Connor who ordered police to extend a rope down the middle of the hall to enforce segregation (an act that did not prevent ‘three burly white steelworkers’ from cutting the rope down twice before submitting to police orders). It was during the 1930s, as well, that Connor had been elected to a stint in the Alabama House of Representatives. There, his closest associate was James Alexander Simpson, a ‘rabid’ racist and an immensely powerful lawyer who served as the legislative mouthpiece for Birmingham’s ‘Big Mules’, the nickname by which the district’s leading steel and industrial corporations were known.⁶

In introducing this early, unfamiliar biography of Connor, I do not mean to suggest that white resistance to desegregation can be reduced to an élite

⁵ Kelly 2001, p. 52.

⁶ Eskew 1997, pp. 89–91.

conspiracy cooked up by Southern industrial capital and carried out by its men in blue. Certainly, by 1963, the Jim Crow South had become deeply polarised around race, and the campaign actively involved a broad cross-section of Southern white society, including substantial numbers of skilled white workers. Moreover, as tensions came to a boil by the middle of the decade, fissures would begin to develop in elite ranks, with some white elites opting to come to terms with the movement in hope that stability could be restored with their basic prerogatives intact. But Connor's biography does raise interesting questions about an aspect that has often been ignored in recent treatments of Jim Crow – that, for Southern elites, the maintenance of a system of racial hierarchy was intimately bound up with their ability to exploit Southern black and white labour under conditions that would allow the South to compete with its more technologically advanced industrial rivals to the North. Jacquelyn Hall's compelling proposition that Jim Crow can best be understood as 'racial capitalism' – 'a system that combined de jure segregation with hyperexploitation of black and white labor'⁷ captures the essence of the post-emancipation South in a way that the race relations framework cannot.

The relationship between that 'hyperexploitation' and the formal ordering of racial hierarchy begins, not in the 1930s with Bull Connor but earlier, in the 1880s. As it had throughout the former Confederate states, the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 marked the restoration of white 'home rule' in Alabama. From 1866 onwards, a campaign of racial terrorism had gathered momentum, aimed at rolling back the social upheaval unleashed by emancipation. The campaign gathered force under the banner of white supremacy until an increasingly preoccupied and indifferent federal government gave the green light for restoration of conservative, white power in the Southern states. 'Restoration' is a somewhat inappropriate term to describe what occurred in 1877, since the 'new men' who came to power in the 'redeemed' South were committed, not to the reconstitution of the agrarian order that the antebellum ruling class had idealised in its defence of slavery in the 1850s, but to a new, industrial South that would catch up with, and eventually overtake, the industrial North.

Birmingham would come to epitomise all the contradictions inherent in that new departure: the discovery of vast coal and iron ore deposits in the

⁷ Hall 2001.

area in the early 1870s raised expectations that the district might eventually outrun Pittsburgh as the world's leading manufacturer of steel. But natural abundance was insufficient to guarantee such an outcome: the key to the region's coming prosperity was its seemingly infinite supply of cheap native black and white labour. 'Nowhere in the world is the industrial situation so favorable to the employer as it is now at the south', a typical editorial in the *Manufacturers' Record* boasted. The black worker, in particular, represented to industrial élites the 'most important working factor in the great and varied resources of the [region]', whose labour would 'yet aid his white friends . . . to take the lead in the cheapest production on this continent'. The Birmingham district would become, in the words of one of its ablest industrial historians, 'an iron plantation in an urban setting'.⁸

The modernisers' determination to retain cheap black labour as an indispensable element in making the region profitable goes a long way toward explaining the evolution of racial segregation in the late nineteenth-century South. The most influential account of the rise of formal segregation locates the origins of the system in élite attempts to deflect an interracial, third-party challenge to the New South social order in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Leaders of the new, industry-oriented leadership of the South had barely consolidated their authority under the banner of 'white supremacy' when sharp internal antagonisms began to re-emerge – most ominously in the form of an 'agrarian revolt' – and threaten white solidarity. By the end of the 1880s, an oppositional third party had emerged in many parts of the South: white sharecroppers and farmers began defecting from the Democratic Party, considered too beholden to the 'money power', and, in order to make themselves electorally viable, were compelled to seek support from African-Americans, thereby violating the Democrat's central shibboleth. Substantial numbers of blacks, themselves angry over their desertion at the hands of a Republican Party no longer interested in defending civil rights, cast their lot with the Populists, and an unprecedented, interracial revolt began to take shape, raising the alarm among élites across the South.

African-Americans played a central role in the life of these insurgencies. Particularly in northern Alabama, where the Greenback-Labor Party emerged as 'the strongest advocates of the rights of blacks' in the Deep South, African-Americans 'figured prominently, sometimes dominantly' in party life. The

⁸ *Manufacturers' Record* 1890 and Lewis 1984, p. xiv.

Alabama Greenbacks' 'most charismatic leader', the black coal miner Willis Johnson Thomas, became so popular 'that predominantly white clubs invited him to speak, and his revivalistic fervor resulted in interracial meetings'. The coloured Greenback Club at Jefferson Mines, of which Thomas was the 'leading spirit', 'had the best order and held the most regular meetings of any club' in Alabama, one prominent white party organiser noted. Local Democrats worried openly that 'if we let this nigger alone he will ruin our whole State', and fretted that the rise of the Greenbacks threatened to overturn the delicate racial hierarchy that Redemption had only recently restored. 'Three years ago', one dejected Democrat complained after a brush with Thomas in 1878, 'if a negro dared to say anything about politics, or public speaking, or sitting on a jury . . . he would be driven out of the county, or shot, or hung in the woods. . . . Now white people are backing them in doing such things'. That the party's opponents found this latter aspect of anti-Redeemer activism so troubling is significant: reports of an imminent collapse of the colour line were certainly exaggerated, but the racial egalitarianism exhibited in the Greenback insurgency contrasted dramatically with the fierce injunctions against interracialism emanating from élite circles throughout the South.⁹

Significantly, these insurgencies established their most formidable strongholds in the mining camps of the Birmingham district. The development of the coal region concentrated large numbers of black and white miners in areas already nourishing a tradition of defiance against black-belt élites, bringing a cohesion to such sentiments that could not be matched in the hill-county districts of Georgia or Mississippi. Concentrated in the coal camps, where most of them worked as full-time miners, Greenback organisers circulated throughout the surrounding countryside, organising local farmers into party clubs. The semi-proletarian character of the northern Alabama Greenbacks imbued the organisation with a bread-and-butter pragmatism that was lacking elsewhere; their local party programme not only reflected the national organisation's general concerns over the growing haughtiness of capital but concerned itself with the day-to-day grievances of area miners. The party railed against the notorious convict lease system and low wages and demanded an end to payment in company scrip. It gave voice to miners' complaints that they were being cheated through short-weighting of coal and pledged itself to work for more stringent safety laws and a rigorous system of mine inspection.

⁹ Hyman 1990 p. 182, Letwin 1991, p. 7, Flynt 1989, p. 98, Gutman 1969, pp. 511–12.

The élite response to the rise of Southern Populism foreshadowed their reaction to every major episode of interracial lower class revolt in the coming years. Charitably enshrined in the historical literature as paternalists and racial moderates, the 'forward-thinking' industrial modernisers turned, almost reflexively, to race-baiting: white Populists were physically intimidated through vigilante methods reminiscent of the Klan and denounced as traitors to their 'Anglo-Saxon heritage'. Through a combination of flagrant bribery and even more extreme physical coercion, black Southerners were neutralised as an electoral factor, and the Populist challenge rolled back. In public declarations that were, in his view, completely compatible with everything else he had advocated for Southern progress, the New South propagandist Henry Grady (editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*) upheld the 'infallible decree' that the 'supremacy of the white race of the South must be maintained forever, and the domination of the negro resisted at all hazards'. Only the unequivocal enforcement of black subordination, it seemed to Grady and others of his standing, could exorcise the frightening spectre of impending class conflict among whites.¹⁰

The defeat of the Populists ushered in a period referred to by the pioneering black historian Rayford Logan as the 'nadir' in African-American history¹¹ – a period marked by the horrific racial violence and legal restrictions that became the hallmark of the segregated South. Prior to the decisive defeat of Populism in 1896, only one state (Mississippi) had begun the process of disfranchising black voters, but, by the first decade of the new century, every one of the ex-Confederate states had effectively deprived black Southerners of the ballot. Separation of the races in all public accommodations – loosely, unevenly observed in custom before the rise of Populism – became formally inscribed and legally enforced throughout the South in the worsening racial climate after the mid-1890s. White supremacy had been salvaged, and the Populist challenge deflected, but at great cost to black Southerners and to the possibilities for an interracial alternative in the South.¹²

The scale of the retreat was partially mitigated in the Birmingham district, where interracialism outlived the defeat of the third-party movements, and would be resurrected in a few short years. The concentration of large numbers

¹⁰ Grady 1972, p. 51.

¹¹ Logan's 1954 seminal study became better known as Logan 1965.

¹² On the rise and decline of Southern Populism, see Hicks 1961, Woodward 1997, pp. 235–90 and McMath 1993.

of industrial workers in the district, for whom some pragmatic alliance across the colour line represented not a utopian extravagance but a pragmatic necessity, lent coherence and continuity to a tendency that was more difficult to sustain in the rural South. Miners managed to maintain some semblance of basic workplace organisation through the 1890s – first in the Knights of Labor and then in the independent United Mine Workers of Alabama – before finally affiliating to the United Mine Workers of America (the UMW) at the turn of the century. But the obstacles to effective interracial collaboration were considerable.

The importance of the South's large pool of 'cheap, docile negro labor' was elevated by the region's peculiar industrial evolution. The region presents an almost classical example of what Marxists have described as 'combined and uneven development': the turn-of-the-century South included a number of exceptional areas where large concentrations of industrial workers laboured in mills, foundries, and manufacturing plants on a par with the most advanced in the North, but these stood like frontier outposts of a new age in a region overwhelmingly steeped in primitive agriculture, in some places little-changed from the way it had been conducted in the antebellum period. Most obviously, the low standard of living that Southern employers were able to impose on blacks, made possible in part by the legal framework of Jim Crow, set a low standard for the treatment of Southern workers of both races. The South remained the most impoverished region of the United States, with per capita wages for industrial workers at about one third the national average as late as 1935. And, while white workers generally received higher wages than blacks, by any measure (mortality, literacy levels, exposure to disease, access to health care), they endured worse conditions than their counterparts anywhere else in the country.

Not only the economic conditions faced by Southern workers, but their rights as nominally free workers were sharply circumscribed in the New South order. Broad application of the convict lease system in the mining industry, for example, provided employers with a vital mechanism for resisting the demands of free workers, white and black. As leading coal operators were well aware, the presence of convicts made it nearly impossible for free labour to organise effective industrial action. This explains why the overwhelmingly white mine workforce in Tennessee engaged in a year-long rebellion against convict lease operators there in 1892, on several occasions arming themselves to take possession of the mines and freeing the convicts being held in company

stockades.¹³ The same dynamic was central to the fight against the convict lease system in Alabama, where the UMW provided the most consistent opposition to the convict system. In neither case did miners necessarily espouse thoroughgoing racial egalitarianism, but the dynamic for a confrontation between white employers and white workers – that is, a split in the ranks of white supremacy – was inscribed in the New South's industrial order.¹⁴

Calculated attempts to pit black workers against Southern whites went beyond the convict lease system. Employers expressed a 'preference' for black labour in circumstances where, they were convinced, blacks could be forced to work under conditions and for wages that free white workers would spurn: 'The Southern employer . . . shrinks from having white labor introduced which will call for concessions and demand rights denied the negro', editors at the *Manufacturers' Record* acknowledged. Black workers' vulnerability provided employers with a barrier against trade unionism emanating from the North. One English traveller to the region noted the 'disposition' among Southern employers 'to rely on black labour as a conservative element, securing them against the dangers and difficulties which they see arising from the combinations and violence of white labourers in some of the Northern cities'. The Negro's 'presence', employers acknowledged, 'has prevented the spread of labor organizations in the South [keeping the region] free from the futile interruptions by strikes and other disturbances of the exertions of capital and labor'.¹⁵

With the defeat of Populism, Birmingham district employers set about constructing a system of racial paternalism, which aimed to take advantage of the legal and physical vulnerability of black workers under Jim Crow to rid the district of union agitation. Armed with the franchise and with some guarantee of their civil rights, African-American workers had shown themselves at least as susceptible to political militancy and trade unionism as whites, but growing racial hostility and the deterioration of their predicament after the mid-1890s, compounded by harsh material desperation, meant that employers came increasingly to view their endless supply of black labourers desperate to escape plantation drudgery as vital to their hopes for warding off union organisation. District mines and mills absorbed a large number of

¹³ On the Tennessee convict war, see Shapiro 1998.

¹⁴ On Alabama coal unionism, see Letwin 1998 and Kelly 2001.

¹⁵ *Manufacturers' Record* (1898, 1905), Sir George Campbell cited in DuBois 1992.

whites from outlying counties in northern Alabama, and efforts to import skilled labour had brought a handful of European immigrants, but, by the end of the century, employers attempted to satisfy their labour demand mainly through increasing employment of blacks. By 1900, African-Americans formed the largest ethnic component in the mines, and within ten years would make up three-quarters of the iron and steel workforce. Birmingham became home to the largest concentration of black industrial workers in the nation.¹⁶

The basic elements of the paternalist strategy are evident as early as 1894 when, faced with an attempt to organise his Blue Creek mines, TCI founder Henry DeBardeleben offered to establish an all-black colony – a ‘Negro Eden’, as he put it – in return for a guarantee of labour peace. ‘A job at Blue Creek is a desirable one’, he advised blacks. ‘[You] can have your own churches, schools and societies, and conduct [your] social affairs in a manner to suit [yourselves], and there need be no conflict between the races’.¹⁷ DeBardeleben’s appeal prefigured the coal operators’ approach to black labour in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Deliberately wrapped in a challenge to racial self-esteem, his proposition represents an attempt to put the best face on the newly ascendant doctrine of ‘separate-but-equal’ and harness it to the benefit of the operators; to hold out the semblance of power and autonomy now that black self-determination had been shorn of any real substance. And, to the extent that the miners’ union fell short of practising real equality, the operators’ appeals inevitably struck a chord among black miners.

What is most remarkable about the employers’ efforts at manipulating racial antagonism, however, is not their success, but the miners’ ability to disrupt these attempts with effective cross-racial campaigns. They did so, moreover, in a context where interracialism was not only difficult, but almost universally condemned as an heretical affront to Southern ‘tradition’. The bulk of *Race, Class and Power* is concerned with the history of working-class interracialism between two major miners’ strikes in 1908 and 1920. Both of these strikes are narrated in close detail in the text, and I do not want to spend a lot of time here reconstructing them. Instead, I will concentrate on two aspects of these confrontations that I consider crucial to the book’s contribution to our understanding of Southern history in this period: first, the reaction that

¹⁶ Harris 1977, p. 108; Cell 1982, pp. 126–7; Wilson 1982, pp. 172–3.

¹⁷ Norrell 1991, p. 128.

working-class interracialism provoked among the New South's ruling class, many of whom genuinely considered themselves 'friends of the Negro', advocates of a progressive new order for the South; second, the incredible potential – unrealised in the end – that working-class black and white Southerners showed during each of these confrontations for transforming the South. Throughout both of these strikes, the situation was far too grim and precarious, the odds against a miners' victory too unfavourable, to ever allow a full-fledged 'festival of the oppressed' to manifest itself. Neither strike, at any point, ever spilled out far enough beyond the bounds of industrial confrontation to compel a fundamental questioning of white supremacy on the part of whites. But the events do provide us with a small glimpse of the possibilities.

Frank Evans had been mayor of Birmingham before the turn of the century, elected in part with the support of the district's black establishment. But, by the time a miners' strike broke out in 1908, Evans was on the payroll of the Alabama Coal Operators Association (the ACOA), paid for the diatribes that he submitted regularly to the local press. One of his most lurid reports on the strike appeared after he witnessed an outdoor, interracial mass meeting at Dora. In his account, he drew a direct, and potent, parallel between the extraordinary situation developing in the district and the 'horrors' of black Reconstruction thirty years earlier. 'It was a third of a century ago', he wrote, 'that the people of Alabama by rigid force . . . stopped the advance of a threatening peril which endangered our social fabric – the inculcation in the minds of black of the idea of social equality', an idea that had only been put down by 'the Caucasian blood of this state'. 'When today this correspondent saw the commingling of whites and blacks at Dora, where he beheld the sympathetic arms of a negro . . . embrace a white speaker . . . in the very presence of white women and girls, I thought to myself: has it again come to this?', he wrote in the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 8 August 1908.

Evans's reports were broadly representative of the turn to race-baiting that both miners' strikes elicited from Birmingham's most respectable citizens. Operators Walter Moore and Guy Johnson penned a letter to the local press characterising the UMW's interracial policy as 'a direct insult to our southern traditions'. Another complained that the 'chief white leaders of this strife' had 'fired the minds of ignorant and vicious blacks with the statement that . . . the negro was doing all the work and the white man getting the pay'. The editor of the *Birmingham Age-Herald's* society page, Dolly Dalrymple,

horrified by the union's attempt to organise interracial women's auxiliaries in 1908, mounted an aggressive defence of the colour line: 'White women and black women meeting on the basis of "social equality" indeed! White men holding umbrellas over negro speakers! Black men addressing white men as 'brother'! The women of our fair southland resent it! The spectacle witnessed by one correspondent at Jasper, where 'a brass band led a parade through the streets' in which 'negroes as well as whites bore red flags, and black men were among the principal speakers', seemed to Birmingham's men of wealth to portend certain disaster. They reacted with a call to arms. In 1908, a group of prominent citizens met with UMW officials and publicly threatened to unleash a race riot. The local businessmen's association threatened to organise vigilante squads until the Governor of the state acceded to their demand to impose martial law. Declaring that he would 'not tolerate eight or nine thousand idle niggers in the State of Alabama', Governor Braxton Bragg Comer finally suppressed the strike, ordering the military to cut down the tents of strikers evicted from company housing. In 1916, and again in 1920, strikers had to defend themselves not against the Ku Klux Klan, revived in the district by the steel companies to contain wartime labour militancy, but also the actions of the state National Guard, who carried out a number of brutal lynchings under the direct auspices of district coal operators.¹⁸

Clearly, the spectre of working-class interracialism revealed the limits of racial paternalism and demonstrated the compatibility of Southern 'progressivism' with the most reactionary elements of Southern white 'tradition'. To generalise from the Birmingham experience, racism won 'a new lease on life' in the region's scramble for industrial prosperity. But what did these confrontations reveal about the permanence and immutability of Southern racial custom? Here, some qualification is in order. Miners did not manage, during either of these confrontations, to establish an egalitarian oasis in the midst of the racially-charged climate of the early twentieth-century South. Formally, the UMW disavowed any intention of interfering with the racial status quo, a position that reflected both the defensive posture they had been compelled to adopt in the face of unrelenting attacks from all sides and the racial sentiment of a majority of its white membership, who had been won

¹⁸ *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 3, 22, 24, 25 and 27 August, and 25 September 1908; see also Hornady 1921, p. 55.

to a defence of 'industrial equality', but who had not yet been compelled to transcend the deeply-inscribed ideas about race then dominating Southern society. But many white miners came to realise, in the course of events, that the degradation of black labour was somehow aimed at them as well, and realised that no challenge to their employers' power was possible without a degree of interracial co-operation.

Insofar as we are able to reconstruct these strikes, they demonstrate the relative fluidity of racial boundaries at the bottom of Southern society, and show that heightened polarisation around class – around the antagonistic material interests of Southern white élites and the mass of ordinary Southerners of both races – began to undermine the racial hierarchy thought to be unchanging and indelibly inscribed in Southern society. One of the conspicuous effects of the mineworkers' challenge was the way it helped puncture the aura of white invincibility. In a society that threatened harsh retribution against those blacks who transgressed even the most trivial aspects of racial etiquette, the audacity of black strikers who took up arms to defend their union set officials reeling. The more than twenty thousand miners who joined the strike in 1908 included many of those who had been recruited to DeBardeleben's 'Negro Eden' a decade earlier. Black strikers were 'everywhere in predominance and armed to the teeth', one military official declared, and when deputies challenged two armed blacks at Blue Creek and 'told them to stop parading the roads with their weapons', the strikers 'stood up and gave the deputies a fight, firing at them with considerable precision'. Of seventeen strikers arrested for dynamiting houses at Acton, thirteen were African-Americans. Twenty-seven strikers were arrested after an attack on a trainload of scabs at Blocton, among them '8 negro men, 1 negro woman, and the balance Slavs'. Two black men and a black woman were the only people arrested for setting the charge to a TCI foreman's house at Pratt City. And, when the 1908 strike went down to defeat, UMW officials lauded their black members: 'There are no better strikers in the history of the UMW than the coloured miners of Alabama', one declared. 'They fought manfully for their rights'.¹⁹

One other telling feature of both strikes – alarming to both black and white élites – was the way in which protracted upheavals managed to rearrange lines of sympathy and solidarity according to union membership rather than race. Although, in both cases, the operator's strategy for breaking the strikes

¹⁹ Lewis 1987, p. 49; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 18 and 21 July and 20 August 1908.

rested on the importation of large numbers of black strike-breakers, in neither strike did the campaign to rid the district of scabs manifest a specifically racial dynamic. If anything, UMW members expressed a certain amount of sympathy for the trainloads hauled in from the plantation districts, many of whom were unaware that they were being brought in to break a strike. In contrast, local farmers who willingly crossed the picket lines (and who were more likely to be white) were shown little leniency. Black unionists did not hesitate to deal harshly with scabs of either race, and white miners were known quite frequently to take up arms in defence of black strikers in police custody. The 'Citizen's Committee' aligned with the operators complained that within the UMW 'the negroes have been elected to high office . . . and their authority and counsel are respected and obeyed'. They swore out an affidavit against the union, complaining that black UMW vice president Joe Sorsby had been observed 'very often dictating to the white stenographers with his hat on his head, and with a cigar in his mouth'.²⁰

In the end, the attempts of union coal miners in the Birmingham district to defy the power of regional élites failed; their efforts overcome by the superior, and awesome, power of the mine operators and their allies. Their tentative breach of the colour line was contained before it could have developed into a wider, frontal challenge to Jim Crow, but, in the course of their struggles, black and white miners had exposed the relationship between racial hierarchy and labour exploitation that lay at the heart of the system. If the Alabama mining district constituted an anomalous feature on the industrial landscape of the New South, it was not because the conditions endured by black and white miners were exceptional: labourers in the region's timber and turpentine camps, iron ore mines, docks, levees, railroads, and even cotton fields worked under régimes that would have felt familiar to most miners. Birmingham's exceptionalism lay in the fact that its coal miners – unlike most of their counterparts in Southern industry – succeeded in giving area employers a run for their money. Far from being indifferent to or repelled by the excesses of Jim Crow, white employers were its chief beneficiaries. White workers, however, were among its victims. In their attempts to mount an effective challenge to the power of their employers, black and white Alabama miners advanced a vision that – while falling short of thoroughgoing racial egalitarianism – nevertheless had to be snuffed out lest it become infectious among

²⁰ Governor Thomas Kilby Administrative Files 1921a, 1921b.

others at the bottom of Southern society. The 1920 defeat, in a strike that the business press dubbed Alabama's 'most stupendous confrontation between labor and capital', dealt a severe blow to working-class interracialism. The path was now clear for the rise of the 'Bull' Connors, while prospects that the challenge to Jim Crow would involve substantial numbers of ordinary white Southerners had been weakened. The stage was, in some respects, set for the confrontation that would spell the end of Jim Crow, under very different terms, a half-century later.²¹

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²¹ Davies (circa Nov. 1920).

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