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## **LABOR, RACE, AND THE SEARCH FOR A CENTRAL THEME IN THE HISTORY OF THE JIM CROW SOUTH**

The pre-eminent historian of North American slavery in the pre-civil rights era, Georgia-born Ulrich B. Phillips, carried into his scholarship the conviction that the “central theme of southern history” had been the persistence of a “common resolve indomitably maintained” among white Southerners to defend their political, economic, and social supremacy in the region, to preserve the South as a “white man’s country.” Although he crafted detailed, seminal studies of the plantation system and acknowledged its centrality in Southern society, slavery was not primarily for Phillips a system of commodity production built around forced labor. Instead he emphasized its role as a mechanism for ordering human relationships in a society saddled with the unique “burden” of managing the co-existence of two distinct races—the ostensibly superior white progeny of the European migration and the inferior descendants of African slaves.<sup>1</sup>

This “racial interpretation of southern society,” which explained change over time as a series of creative adaptations by which the white South guarded its ascendancy from powerful internal and external pressures, continues to underpin popular and scholarly understanding of the American South.<sup>2</sup> Phillips was an unapologetic defender of the slave system, but more recent scholarship—informed by an explicit commitment to racial equality—has attempted to construct a new interpretation of the Southern past atop the same basic foundations. The historian Winthrop Jordan, for example, has argued with a logic reminiscent of Phillips’s that the panoply of racial assumptions attending slavery had coalesced long before large-scale contact between Africans and Europeans, and that the turn to racially-based slavery in the Americas had therefore been an “unthinking decision” —a natural extension of European contempt for blackness. According to Jordan, race prejudice both preceded and gave birth to African slavery in the New World: the system of slavery merely provided the best framework through which longstanding racial assumptions could be formally inscribed in the colonial order.<sup>3</sup>

A critique of this “idealist” explanation of the origins of race in America was pioneered as early as the 1940s, most notably by the Trinidadian historian and one-time Prime Minister Eric Williams, but in more recent years has been most effectively articulated by the historian of American slave emancipation Barbara Fields. Fields has questioned the assumption—shared by both Jordan and Phillips—that “the chief business of slavery [was] the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco” for sale on the Atlantic market. In particular, she rejects Jordan’s description of slavery as “the ultimate segregator,” raising the obvious question of whether “Europeans seeking the ultimate “method” of segregating Africans would go to the trouble and expense of transporting them across the Atlantic for that purpose” when

“they could have achieved the same end so much more simply by leaving the Africans in Africa.” For Fields, and for a generation of social historians whose fine-grained studies undermine its validity, the deficiencies in the racial interpretation are symptomatic of a more general tendency to ascribe to race an autonomy and determinative power it does not possess. The evolution of popular ideas about race needs to be understood in the context of the totality of social relations, Fields argues: they are profoundly shaped by and in turn feed into more general changes in political economy.<sup>4</sup>

This article is an attempt to extend the materialist argument propounded by Williams, Fields, and others into the study of the post-Reconstruction South (roughly the years 1877-1920), about which a very similar controversy rages. Like the origins debate, the attempt to establish a framework for understanding the transformed “New” South that arose out of the tumult of slave emancipation and the ashes of planter defeat in the Civil War has produced a rather incongruous divide in the field of Southern history. Ironically, the most coherent and enduring narrative compatible with materialism was pioneered not by radicals but by the liberal historian C. Vann Woodward, in his magisterial *Origins of the New South*. More curiously, the assumptions interwoven into Phillips’s traditionalist outlook have been most thoroughly assimilated not by like-minded conservatives, but by scholars of a left-wing persuasion. Daunted by the virulence with which white supremacy was asserted in the turn-of-the-century South, many have found Phillips’s racialist explanation—minus its assumption of white superiority—appealing. The materialist framework, with its ostensibly dogmatic focus on relations of production, strikes some as insufficiently nuanced for unraveling 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.”<sup>5</sup>

Race hatred seems to many scholars to have operated independently of all other considerations and even to have determined the character and pace of change over time in Southern society. In particular, the racial explanation has won wide support among African Americanists and among a growing layer of labor and social historians.<sup>6</sup> Among the former, the lingering influence of an amorphous black nationalism and a residual demand for compensatory history<sup>7</sup> have reinforced the attraction of an interpretation that privileges race, while elsewhere it has been the left academy’s more general turn away from class and towards “identity” that has enhanced its explanatory appeal. For all, the “autonomy” of race seems self-evident. While acknowledging that “there is truth in the assertion that the key to [. . .] white supremacy was the southern planters’ desire for cheap black labor,” one account typical of this trend concludes, nevertheless “hatred of blacks has been so powerful as to exist *virtually independent* of all other considerations.”<sup>8</sup>

Fundamentally, this article asserts that while the importance of race antagonism cannot be understated, neither can its salience be grasped without rigorous attention to the general context in which it flourished. The incremental advance of Jim Crow (formal segregation) was, in part, an orchestrated reaction against emancipation and black self-assertion but, crucially, it developed against a backdrop of staggering economic backwardness and accelerated, if fitful, industrialization and the extreme social tensions unleashed by that process.<sup>9</sup> In short, the maintenance of white supremacy in the New South was not an end in itself, as much of the recent literature would suggest, but an essential element in the more fundamental process of Southern integration into Gilded Age, capitalist America. The path toward industrialization was not adopted in order to perpetuate racial inequality; racism did not merely linger in the minds of the white South like some genetically-induced hangover. Rather, white supremacy won a new lease on life in the South's desperate scramble to catch up with and fully insert itself into a national economy directed by the industrial North.

A materialist framework which can provide historians with a useful approach into the world of the turn-of-the-century South must be nuanced enough to acknowledge the deep inroads that racialist assumptions and folklore had made in the white Southerners' psyche.<sup>10</sup> Popular ideas about race were not mere illusory traces of more "real"—that is, material forces—but a formidable ideological encumbrance hammered out on the anvil of more than two centuries of slavery. The highly ritualized public lynching and dismembering of black "suspects" so common in the South during this period provides one obvious example of the inadequacy of narrow, algebraic materialist calculation. Reported lynchings in the U.S. averaged 150 a year between 1881 and 1900, peaking at 230 in the year 1892. Eighty-two percent of them occurred in the South; nearly all of the victims were poor black men. Often, lynching "parties" were premeditated, announced days in advance, sometimes allowing white Southerners to book special railroad excursions so that men, women, and children from far-flung areas might attend and bear witness to the ritual. Public lynching was very much a family affair, with mutilation and dismemberment quite common; occasionally, detached body parts were sold to the highest bidder or displayed in shop windows.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously any attempt to plumb the depths of such a pervasive, collective depravity would have to devote considerable attention to the racial outlook white Southerners from every strata carried into their relations with blacks. Deeply rooted, highly potent assumptions about race permeated the consciousness of the white South. Their persistence has led some scholars to conclude that this consciousness was fixed and immutable; that timeless notions of race were too deeply embedded in the outlook of white Southerners to stand any chance of being transformed. Yet the industrializing South provides more than a handful of examples in which blacks and whites stood together against what they perceived

as shared injustice. Admittedly, these were often fleeting moments driven more by desperation than conscious egalitarianism, but their recurrence in a range of situations suggests that white Southerners' ideas about race were subject to change under stress rather than monolithic or constant.

The New South's industrialization project was born of the devastation and humiliation suffered by the white South in the Civil War. For twelve years after the Confederacy's surrender (during the period known as Reconstruction) freed slaves, tenuously supported by the Republican Party, fought a lop-sided and ultimately unsuccessful battle against the deposed slaveholders to attempt to bring some meaning to their newfound freedom. Freed men and women believed that unless they could acquire "40 acres and a mule" and the independence that land ownership would afford them, they would be forced back under the political and economic domination of the large landowners.

A minority of Republicans supported the ex-slaves' demands, but the moderate core of the Party, increasingly dominated by men of wealth in the North, were unwilling to press for thoroughgoing reform, and by 1877 had become convinced that their interests were better served by an alliance with Southern white conservatives than the largely illiterate and destitute ex-slave population. Economic crisis and the outbreak of explosive confrontation between labor and capital in the North formed the backdrop against which many erstwhile "friends of the negro" retreated from the pursuit of racial justice and equality. The ex-slaves' demand for redistribution of the lands they had worked under the old regime struck at "the fundamental relation of industry to capital," editors at the *New York Times* warned. "[The proposed confiscation] strikes at the root of all property rights in both sections. It concerns Massachusetts quite as much as Mississippi."<sup>12</sup> As Ku Klux Klan terrorism gathered force in the ex-Confederate states, Washington tired of its intractable "negro problem" and abandoned freedmen and women to their former masters. The withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 marked the final triumph of white Southern "home rule" and the end of the Republican commitment to building a non-racial democracy in the American South.

Generally speaking, those who came to power in the post-Reconstruction South were not backward-looking agrarians intent on resurrecting the antebellum social order but keen converts to industrialization, whose formula for progress would have been considered heretical in the Old South. They were candid in acknowledging that slavery had been "wrong," although they showed little remorse for the treatment the system had imposed on the slaves themselves. Steeped in the paternalist tradition, they considered slavery a benevolent institution in which unselfish masters had undertaken great sacrifices to provide savage Africans with a "school of civilization." The modernizers' chief complaint about the antebellum social order was not moral but pragmatic: it had held back the vast economic potential of the region. Under the antebellum regime,

iconoclasts had raised the complaint that slaveowner hostility to industrialization impeded diversification and shackled the Southern economy to a fluctuating cotton market, but their critique had been muzzled in the interest of presenting a united front against the abolitionist North. In the new context after 1877, they stepped out from the shadows to “redeem” the region from its legacy of backwardness and economic subordination to the North.<sup>13</sup>

New South spokesmen identified two principal assets that, in their view, guaranteed the region’s industrial supremacy. In dozens of speeches North and South, the most well known proselytizer for regional “progress,” Atlanta newspaperman Henry Grady, boasted of the South’s tremendous natural potential. “Our coal supply is exhaustless,” he reminded a receptive audience at the Texas State Fair in 1887. “In marble and granite we have no rivals, and in lumber our riches are even vaster. Surely the basis of the South’s wealth and power is laid by the hand of Almighty God.” But in their attempts to lure Northern capital to the region, Grady and his disciples rarely neglected to emphasize the South’s favorable labor market as its most stunning asset.

Dismissing the region’s natural advantages as being of “minor importance,” a group of visiting New England industrialists identified lower labor costs (estimated by them at 40 percent below those in the North), a longer working day (24 percent longer in North Carolina than in Massachusetts), and the apparent lack of a “disposition to organize labor unions” as the chief advantages of operating in the South. “Because long hours of labor and moderate wages will continue to be the rule for many years to come,” an editorial in the *Manufacturers’ Record*, the region’s leading business paper, reasoned, “the South [ . . . ] will continue to be the best section of the United States for [ . . . ] men of enterprise.”<sup>14</sup>

The determination of local, state, and regional boosters to maintain a “pro-business” climate imposed upon the bi-racial Southern working class a regime which combined many of the harshest features of industrial society with the most repugnant elements of the slave system. As he watched the Jim Crow South take shape before him, W.E.B. DuBois reminded students of Southern history that “the economic system of the South today [ . . . ] is not the same system as that of the old industrial North, of England, or of France, with their trades-unions, their restrictive laws, their written and unwritten commercial customs, and their long experience. It is rather a copy of the England of the early nineteenth century, before the factory acts [ . . . ].” In a society that left black workers and many whites languishing in the “twilight zone between slavery and freedom,” Southern capital “accepted race hatred and disfranchisement as [key elements in] a permanent program of exploitation.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the “labor question” did not feature prominently in their public oratory, New South spokesmen were well aware of its significance in their plans for transforming the region. Clearly it was in the context of its centrality to the industrialization project that Southern statesmen and industrial elites grappled

with the thorny problem of racial co-existence. And irrefutably, their vision of a prosperous South rested upon the certainty that its black population (upwards of 5 million by 1880) would accept its tightly circumscribed role as the “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” as the “mudsills,” the menial laborers of Southern society. “The greatest resource of the South is the enormous supply of cheap colored labor,” one typical editorial in the *Manufacturers’ Record* acknowledged. “Nowhere in the world is the industrial situation so favorable to the employer as it is now at the South,” another boasted, adding that the negro was the “most important working factor in the great and varied resources of the [region],” whose labor would “yet aid his white friends [. . .] to take the lead in the cheapest production on this continent.”<sup>16</sup>

The modernizers’ determination to retain cheap black labor as an indispensable element in attracting capital goes a long way toward explaining the evolution of racial segregation in the late nineteenth-century South. Indeed, the most influential account of the rise of formal segregation locates the origins of the system in elite attempts to deflect an interracial, third-party challenge to the New South social order in the 1890s. Leaders of the new, commerce-oriented leadership of the South had barely consolidated their authority under the banner of “white supremacy” before sharp internal antagonisms began to re-emerge—most ominously in the form of the Populist “agrarian revolt”—and threaten white solidarity. Grady expressed his fears that “the white vote of the South [might] divide” and that, disregarding the color line, the electorate would realign “on economic or moral questions as interest or belief demands.” “The worst thing [. . .] that could happen,” he argued, “is that the white people of the South should stand in opposing factions, with the vast mass of [. . .] negro votes between.”<sup>17</sup>

The elite 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 harbingers of Southern prosperity and industrial salvation 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 neutralized 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, Henry Grady held up 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 exorcize the frightening specter of looming class conflict among whites.<sup>18</sup>

The defeat of the Populists ushered in the period referred to by the pioneering black historian Rayford Logan as the “nadir” in African American history<sup>19</sup>—a period marked by the extreme 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 accommodation—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, one might add, to the possibilities for interracial politics in the South.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of the South’s large pool of “cheap, docile negro labor”—after the mid-1890s insulated against the heresy of inter-racialism—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 labored 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, little-changed from the way it had been conducted in the antebellum period. Certainly the conditions under which black and white sharecroppers worked the land had not improved much, and the rural South provided the clearest evidence that the reality of Southern development failed to match Grady’s compelling, embellished vision.

Far from achieving industrial supremacy, the region evolved as little more than a colonial appendage to the much more advanced industrial North, and all the talk of a resurgent South could not hide the fact that its subordination to “alien” and “carpetbagger elements” was more pronounced at the turn of the twentieth century than it had been under Reconstruction. One might go further and argue that the rhetorical deployment of an increasingly strident Southern nationalism developed in sync with the region’s domination by Wall Street and Northern capital: the myth of the “Lost Cause” became an essential prop for regional elites as they brokered the sale of Southern resources to the most powerful corporations in the world, all of them based in the North.<sup>21</sup>

With the single exception of the textile industry (from which blacks were eventually excluded), the South never developed a serious manufacturing base: “industrialization” in the region never amounted to much more than organizing the extraction and transfer of its vast natural resources in oil, timber, coal and iron ore to manufacturing centers in the North. Even in the extractive industries, however, Southern employers had to compete with their Northern counterparts,



and in a situation where many production costs were not under their direct control (shipping charges, for example, along railroads owned by Northerners), their attention focused even more acutely upon labor costs.

The region's evolution as a concentration point for labor-intensive, extractive industries meant that skill requirements were of only secondary importance to Southern employers: what they required first and foremost was an abundant supply of cheap labor, and in this context their black labor supply was a blessing: "the industrial life of the South, [characterized by] the primary handling of raw materials requiring slight skills [. . .] is the natural field for the negro," one observer noted. "[W]ith all the incubuses placed on them," another concluded, "the negroes are a vital factor in southern advancement. Today the South could not do without them for a week. If they should suddenly disappear, the South would be crippled for years to come [. . .]."<sup>22</sup>

In their attempts to pull together a tractable workforce, Southern industrial employers benefited both from the region's demographics and its deeply-rooted racial tradition. The South remained through the end of the Second World War a predominately agricultural region, and its rural workforce ranked consistently as the lowest paid in the country.<sup>23</sup> This ensured, firstly, that a steady stream of destitute black and white agricultural workers leaving the countryside for the city would provide employers with a ready and self-replenishing labor reserve. Their desperation meant, as well, that the labor of those fleeing the Black Belt could be had for much lower wages than the South's industrial competition paid in the North. White supremacy played an important role in holding all of this in place.

The boundary between the Cotton Belt plantation and the factory or mine was a permeable one in the turn-of-the-century South. It was not by any means uncommon for share-croppers stuck on downstate plantations to work a full year without ever actually receiving any wages, and while conditions in the industrial centers were far from ideal, the evidence suggests that industrial squalor was preferable, for many, to the monotony and authoritarianism of rural life. The trek to the industrial Mecca seemed attractive not only to laborers, but to their employers as well: a substantial number of planters became centrally involved as industrial directors in the factories, mines and mills of the South, and predictably they brought with them the habits and customs of labor management developed on the plantations, along with an array of time-honored racial assumptions about how best to handle black labor.

The collective folk wisdom of the Southern planter class became an important element in modern methods of labor management in the South. Interestingly, in spite of their perpetual complaints about the sloth and undependability of black workers, planters generally expressed a positive preference for black labor over white. The industrial South's experience with black labor seemed to mirror that of an Alabama planter, who pleaded the superiority of black field workers by reminding his peers that "no other laborer [. .

] would be as cheerful, or so contented on four pounds of meat and a peck of meal a week, in a little log cabin, with cracks in it large enough to afford free passage to a large cat.” The chief problem with white tenants, reported another, was that “they want more advances and you can’t hold them down the way you can a Negro. If you tell a Negro he can’t have any more, he will go back to work. But a white will grumble and won’t work, and will even move out on you.” While the legal restrictions attending the caste system in the South provided an effective means for disciplining black laborers, planters objected that white tenants enjoyed an “ability [. . .] to resort to legal defense against dishonest settlement, terrorization, illegal eviction or illegal seizure of livestock and personal property.”<sup>24</sup>

If black workers seemed peculiarly well-suited by temperament and tradition to the arduous, unskilled labor requirements of New South industry and agriculture, employers frequently expressed their disappointment that they lacked other qualities essential for making industry productive. Their frustration with the failure of blacks’ inability—or unwillingness—to “harness themselves to the chariot of [industry]”<sup>25</sup> sent them searching from time to time for an alternative source of labor. Planters experimented for a while with Chinese “coolie” labor in the fields, and were joined by industrialists in a brief flirtation with Italian immigrants as a panacea to the alleged “shiftlessness” of negroes, but neither delivered substantially different results. Leading coal and timber operators dispatched labor agents to the north and as far away as Europe to recruit replacements, but never succeeded in attracting adequate numbers southward. A South Carolina labor commissioner concluded that the South’s inability to draw immigrant labor in the same numbers as its Northern competitors was due to employers’ “negro wage.”

A short-lived attempt on the part of Louisiana planters to replace their “unreliable” black workforce with imported Italians failed for the same reason: the tractability of black workers outweighed whatever advantages the Italian propensity for “thrift and industry” seemed to hold out. One objection to Italians was their tendency, after settling up with the landlord at year’s end, to “immediately [begin] to look around and see if there is anything better [. . .]. He visits all the neighboring plantations,” the director of a Louisiana immigration scheme complained, “and if any offer him anything he will pick up and move.” The planters’ other complaint was that they “could not talk to the Italians and direct them in their work as you can a negro.” “Give me the nigger every time,” a satisfied Mississippian proclaimed. “He will live on less and do more hard work, when properly managed, than any other race or class of people.”<sup>26</sup>

The insistence on “proper management” of negro industrial labor is significant, and highlights the dependence of the industrialization project on racial subordination. Here, as well, the planters’ influence was keenly felt. Even in the more advanced industrial operations in the region, the most refined methods of

modern industrial management—notably welfare capitalism imported from the North—coexisted alongside more primitive methods rooted in the slave past: the extensive use of convict labor; harsh, authoritarian control in the workplace itself; the routine application of the whip to maintain labor discipline—all figured prominently in the industrial setting.

Well into the twentieth century Southern employers continued to place a premium on their foremen's aptitude for "handling" negro labor. "The boss who can get the best work from a crew of southern darkies," a Birmingham employer noted, "must be a man of unusual gifts." Lauding the success of an "ideal southern mine boss" in "making his gang of five hundred negroes as efficient as any equal number of whites could be," the *Birmingham Age-Herald* paid homage to superintendent "Captain" John Hanby of the Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron Company. "Generous, bluff, convivial, one minute knocking a negro down for disobedience and the next minute picking him up," Hanby's admirers reasoned that the South's "labor problem" could be easily solved if bosses throughout the region would emulate "Cap" Hanby's "rough and ready" style. Decades of such experience had convinced industrial employers that "there is no superior to the negro as a willing, loyal, reasonable, and obedient laborer."<sup>27</sup>

The elaborate prison apparatus that governed the lives of such a large proportion of black Southerners in the New South—memorialized with varying degrees of authenticity in film and Southern literature, in the blues tradition, and in popular music (most famously perhaps in Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang")—cannot be understood simply as a mechanism for racial control. Fundamentally, the penal system was an appendage of the Southern industrialization project, one that complemented perfectly the employers' aim to underpin the cheapness and vulnerability of its unskilled labor force. Its most odious feature during the period after Reconstruction was the convict lease system, which developed from two distinct, even antagonistic impulses.

As recalcitrant white Southern conservatives began to regain their equilibrium after defeat in the Civil War, they attempted to resurrect in substance what had been abolished in form. So-called Black Codes, passed at the state level to avoid confrontation with the federal government, aimed at pushing freed men and women back toward slavery, prefiguring the overhaul of the legal system undertaken after Redemption. The Codes required blacks to carry written evidence of employment when traveling away from the plantations; they "apprenticed" black children to labor in the fields; prevented black testimony against whites in court; barred blacks from purchasing firearms or renting land; made black "escapees" subject to arrest by any white citizen; and, ominously, allowed for the sale of convict labor at public auction.

Although they were generally repulsed by such legislation, the Republican-led Reconstruction governments themselves were simultaneously grappling with the problem of establishing an effective and comprehensive penal system where

there had been none previously. In the Old South, individual planters and their overseers dispensed whatever “justice” existed, and did so at the plantation level: very few cases involving slaves ever went to court. Of the few prison facilities that had existed prior to the Civil War, some were destroyed during the conflict itself. Republicans shared the planters’ concern for rebuilding the shattered Southern economy and were increasingly indifferent to the plight of ex-slaves. In their rush to devise a workable system they unwittingly set the foundations for the establishment of the convict lease system, transforming large pockets of the developing South into what one historian has aptly termed “the American Gulag.” With the return of white conservatives to power in 1877, the spirit of the Black Codes was grafted onto the convict lease system and the leasing out of convicts to individual corporations would develop quickly into a “dragnet for black labor,” a source of unregulated racial depravity that, in the words of historian Fletcher Melvin Green, “left a trail of dishonor and death that could find a parallel only in the persecutions of the Middle Ages or in the prison camps of Nazi Germany.”<sup>28</sup>

The past decade has seen the publication of a number of important studies which catalog the range of abuses suffered by convicts under the lease system: one historian of the system describes its evolution as simply “a story of endless brutality and neglect.” Mortality rates in the convict camps often exceeded thirty percent annually, and were higher for black convicts than for whites. More relevant here is the critical role played by convict labor in modernizing the South. The list of convict lessees across the region reads like a “Who’s Who” of Southern industry. “The South’s economic development,” one recent study concludes, “can be traced by the blood of its prisoners.”<sup>29</sup>

In Florida convicts were put to work in timber camps, harvesting the state’s 20 million acres of long leaf pine and making the state the nation’s leading exporter of naval stores; in Georgia they were leased out to three of the most prominent politicians in the state (one of them a founder of the Ku Klux Klan), who made fortunes in coal mining and plantation agriculture; in Alabama, they provided the core of the coal mine workforce and mined the “cheapest coal in the nation,” according to one prominent employer; in the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta they built levees and harvested cotton; in Texas and Louisiana they worked the lumber camps and coal mines, the ranches and the sugar plantations. Across the South convicts built the highways and railroads that provided the infrastructure for industrial growth. As many historians have observed, Southern elites only reluctantly embraced the free labor system normally associated with modern capitalism when they did so at all: the lease provided them with a “system of labor recruitment, control, and exploitation in an age of emancipation.” As Alex Lichtenstein has noted, the “rapid development [of the region] rested on the ability of southern [employers] to use the penal system to recruit the core of their productive labor force.”<sup>30</sup>

Thus far I have focused almost exclusively upon the role of black workers in Southern industrialization, but in many ways separating the experience of black and white workers in this process distorts reality. Although their situations differed considerably, although they were spatially separated both by the laws of segregation and by racial customs which they had some part in shaping, and although more often than not blacks and whites did not recognize anything of common interest in their respective predicaments, the reality was that the degradation of black labor affected whites as well.

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 whites. 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 their economic situation but also their rights as nominally free workers were sharply circumscribed by Southern industry. Broad application of the convict lease system in the mining industry, for example, provided employers with an important 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 labor to organize 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.<sup>31</sup> The same dynamic was central to the fight against the convict lease system in Alabama, where the interracial United Mine Workers' Union 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 was inscribed in the New South industrial order, and provided for the possibility of collaboration across the color line at the bottom of society.<sup>32</sup>

The calculated attempt to pit black workers against Southern whites went beyond the convict lease system. Employers expressed a "preference" for black labor 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 industrialists with a barrier against trade unionism emanating out of the North. One English traveler to the region noted the "disposition" among Southern employers "to rely on black labor as a conservative element, securing them against

the dangers and difficulties which they see arising from the combinations and violence of white laborers in some of the Northern cities." Their dissatisfaction with the less attractive qualities associated with black labor was invariably trumped by the realization that the negro's "presence 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." In one respect their outlook towards black labor was pragmatic, almost color blind: the black worker's "rights" were denied by "southern capital [. . .] quite as much because he is at the bottom of the social scale as because he is black."<sup>33</sup>

The truly remarkable feature of Southern labor history, given the ubiquitous influence of white supremacy and the other considerable impediments to bridging the colour line is the frequency with which black and white workers managed to come together in pragmatic collaborations against industrial elites. Until recently, most historians of the American South accepted that the history of the bi-racial Southern working class was one of unremitting hostility, unspeakable violence and brutality, and the submergence of any sense of class consciousness. New studies have, at the very least, revealed the inadequacy of such a view. On the docks of New Orleans and Galveston, Texas, in the timber camps of East Texas and Louisiana, in the Alabama coalfields and the tobacco warehouses of North Carolina, black and white workers pulled together fragile, fleeting, but occasionally effective alliances to pursue their common interests.<sup>34</sup>

While there is no dearth of evidence of deeply-rooted racial antagonism at the bottom of Southern society, any faithful reconstruction must take account of two qualifications uncovered in recent work: first, the region gave rise to a resilient tradition of working class interracialism that emerged under even the most unfavorable circumstances in the volatile environment of the industrializing South. Incipient rather than fully-developed, always hard-pressed to find its feet in the harsh atmosphere underpinned by Jim Crow, the tradition of cross-racial collaboration nevertheless points to the problem of accepting uncritically the myth of the "Solid South," of a white population united across the sharp disparities which pervaded the region.<sup>35</sup>

The second, perhaps more critical insight gained from these new studies, is that although they often presented themselves to the public as "friends of the negro" and the natural protectors of blacks against the transgressions of the white rabble, Southern industrialists—like planter paternalists before them—were determined above all to retain their hold over cheap black labor. The "progressive" image that Henry Grady and his New South apostles attempted to project was based on a glaring contradiction: their formula for "progress" rested, manifestly, upon the continued impoverishment of most black and many white Southerners. And when, on occasion, the "victims" of Southern progress registered their dissent through attempts at third-party politics or effective industrial action, progress gave way very quickly to reaction reminiscent of the

violence of the 1870s. Far from being indifferent to or repelled by the excesses of Jim Crow, Southern white elites had a stake in maintaining the system.

In the closing days of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln had dispatched his adviser Carl Schurz to the South to survey the social landscape which federal power would be left to reckon with in the wake of seemingly imminent Confederate defeat. Schurz reported with palpable consternation that the ex-masters seemed to him unbowed, determined to "introduce some new system of forced labor, not perhaps exactly slavery in its old form, but something similar to it." While Schurz and his contemporaries were able to recognize in the opening days of white home rule the central importance of the labor question, curiously its importance has been lost sight of by those one might expect to give it special attention: labor and social historians.

The treatment of race as an autonomous or determinative force evident in recent scholarship is an obstacle to a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between race, class, and power in the industrializing South. As W. E. B. DuBois noted more than 70 years ago, racial subordination and industrial exploitation were not discrete systems of social control operating independently in a haphazard fashion in the New South. Together they formed an organic and indivisible whole, providing the cornerstone for the region's plans for development and the key element in its formula for "progress."

In a thoughtful review of recent work on the civil rights movement and its adversaries, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has registered the salient point that we need to rethink both the assumption that the movement originated in the aftermath of World War II and the notion that racial polarization concentrated a united black community on one side of the Southern divide and a monolithically racist white populace on the other. New studies have shown traces of the postwar agitation in the Depression years, and the watershed in black Southern politics may have occurred even earlier, in the crisis that developed during World War I. During the thirties, in particular, agitators for black rights were more likely to be found in the labor movement than in the pulpit, and their ranks included radicals from both groups. Hall reinserts the labor question back into the South's complex racial equation, arguing that the Jim Crow social order can "best be called "racial capitalism" [. . .] a system that combined *de jure* segregation with hyper-exploitation of black and white labor."<sup>36</sup> The too-long postponed project of mapping out in detail that crucial relationship between stifling racial oppression and intense exploitation offers exciting new possibilities for coming to terms with Jim Crow.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The perspective permeates all of Phillips's major work, but the most cogent and forceful presentation of his argument about the primacy of race in the organization of Southern society appears in "The Central Theme in Southern History," *American Historical Review* 34 (Oct. 1928): 30-43 (31). Phillips's two outstanding studies of the plantation South, of enduring value for historians of North American slavery, are *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1966 rpt.) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929). In a provocative, critical defense of Phillips's work, the leading modern-day scholar of North American slavery Eugene D. Genovese contends that while Phillips "affirmed the economic impulse to slavery [. . .] he insisted that [. . .] social rather than economic considerations prevailed. Specifically, the presence of large numbers of Africans [. . .] required the maintenance of a regime capable of disciplining them and of preserving social order. The plantation served as the best vehicle, slavery served only as the necessary basis for the plantation regime [. . .]." See Genovese, "Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and His Critics," in *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1971) 279-80. Peter J. Parish concurs that Phillips's work, based on "a deep attachment to the Old South and a belief in black racial inferiority [. . .] treated the slave as the beneficiary of a patriarchal but unprofitable institution designed to maintain the South's cardinal principle of white supremacy." See Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Genovese credits (or faults) Phillips with pioneering the "racial interpretation" of the region's history. See Genovese, "Race and Class in Southern History: An Appraisal of the Work of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips," in *Red and Black*: 288-9. Among others, Carl N. Degler has extended Phillips's argument that the "essential problem was to preserve the structure of white dominance in a biracial society" into the postbellum period. See his *Place Over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977), cited in Barbara Jeanne Fields, "The Nineteenth-Century American South: History and Theory," *Plantation Society* 2:1 (April 1983): 7-27 (7).

<sup>3</sup> See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Oxford UP, 1974). Jordan's argument on race and slavery is distilled in his "Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery," *Journal of Southern History* 28 (1962): 18-30. More recently Alden T. Vaughan has reasserted the idealist explanation for slavery in *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995). For a distillation of Vaughan's argument, see his earlier piece, "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97:3 (July 1989): 311-354.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; London: Deutsch, 1964); Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 2:1 (Spring 1990): 99. Much of the best recent social history on the early Chesapeake confirms the materialist argument. See, in order of publication, Oscar and Mary F. Handlin, "Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly* 7:2 (April 1950): 199-222; Warren M. Billings, "The



Cases of Fernando and Elizabeth Key: A Note on the Status of Blacks in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 30:3 (July 1973): 467-474; T. H. Breen, "A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia, 1660-1710," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1973): 3-25; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: the Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *Myne Owne Ground: Race Relations and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986); Robert McColley, "Slavery in Virginia, 1619-1660: A Reexamination," in Robert H. Abzug and Stephen E. Maizlish, eds., *New Perspectives on Race and Slavery in America: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Stampp* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1986) 11-24; J. Douglas Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia: Indians, Englishmen, and Africans on the Eastern Shore During the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1993). The literature and the contours of the debate are ably summarized by Parish in "Origins and Consolidation," *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) 3-27.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998) xiv.

<sup>6</sup> The proliferation of new cultural studies which focus on white racial identity (and particularly working-class white identity) as a determinative force is the most obvious manifestation of this development: virtually all of the most prominent exponents of this approach assert the inadequacy of materialism for explaining racial animosity in the United States. See for example the essay, "Labor in White Skin: Race and Working Class History" in David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994) 21-38; Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994) 1-24; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 178-188; Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) xix-xliv.

For a critique of "whiteness" studies that emphasizes their weak empirical foundations, see Eric Arnesen, "Scholarly Controversy: Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," in *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 3-32, forthcoming. Adolph Reed Jr. traces the lineage of the current academic fascination with "whiteness" to Gunnar Myrdal's classic study of American race relations, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944). Myrdal's work, which provided the intellectual foundations for liberal understanding and policy relative to race in the postwar United States, was in Reed's view "built around an evasion, the attempt to avoid a class analysis of American race relations" (xi). See also my own comments on this trend as it relates to recent labor historiography in Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001) 3-16, 203-207.

<sup>7</sup> A number of African-American scholars acknowledge explicitly their commitment to crafting a celebratory historiography, an understandable impulse given the historical profession's long-standing denigration of the black experience. See for example Vincent Harding, "Responsibilities of the Black Scholar to the Community" and the introduction to African-American historiography by Thomas C. Holt in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *The State of Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986) 1-12, 277-284. For a more critical evaluation, see the introduction (xi-xxvi) to Clarence E. Walker's provocative *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991), where he argues that "the romanticism that currently characterizes the writing of black history is [. . .] part of a problem inherent in the new social history [. . .]. [S]ocial historians appear reluctant to apply the same standards of critical evaluation to 'the people' that they apply to elites" (xviii).

<sup>8</sup> Orey M. Scruggs, "The Economic and Racial Components of Jim Crow" in Nathan Huggins et al., eds., *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971): 72, 70 (emphasis added). Reed dissents: "Racism is not an affliction," he writes, "it is a pattern of social relations. Nor is it a thing that can act on its own; it exists only as it is reproduced in specific social arrangements in specific societies, under historically specific conditions of law, state, and class power." See Reed's introduction in Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Race: a Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Thus W.E.B. DuBois wrote that the racial phobia common to every strata of the white South "had been supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method [. . .] [which] drove such a wedge between black and white workers that there are probably not anywhere in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently that neither sees anything of common interest." See DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935) 700.

<sup>10</sup> Here I am discussing a legacy of racial ideology which influenced every strata of the white South and was not exclusive to either white elites or plebeians. Fields has written, perceptively, that white supremacy carried somewhat different, occasionally conflicting connotations in different strata of Southern white society, but here I am referring to a body of assumptions widely shared across class lines. See Barbara J. Fields, "Race and Ideology in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James P. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982) 143-277.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Litwack recalls in *Trouble in Mind* that after the lynching of Sam Hose in Georgia in 1899, one anxious participant rushed off to the state capitol "hoping to deliver to the governor [. . .] a slice of Sam Hose's heart." See Litwack, *Trouble in Mind* 281. In his meticulously researched recent study, *Roots of Disorder: Race and Criminal Justice in the American South, 1817-1880* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998), Christopher Waldrep sheds some much-needed light on at least one aspect of this problem. Waldrep argues that the white South's penchant for vigilante and extralegal violence is rooted in the tradition of private regulation of justice prevailing under plantation slavery. "Because slaveowners [. . .] could or would not confine slaves to their plantations and therefore could not entirely keep them out of court," he writes, "they erected a number of barriers designed to limit black access to the legal process [. . .] (22). Most crime could be punished in the neighborhood where it occurred, free from the interference by higher authorities."

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, 2 May 1866, cited in Eric Foner, "Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation, and Reconstruction," in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980) 144.

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, Southern elites launched the industrial transformation of the region in close collaboration with Northern capital, a paradox noted by C. Vann Woodward in his account. It is in the context of this new departure that the myth of the Lost Cause becomes central to Southern white identity: "The deeper the involvements in commitments to the New Order," he writes, "the louder the protests of loyalty to the Old." See Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1951) 154-157; (155).

<sup>14</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*: 307; *Manufacturers' Record* (16 Aug. 1890).

<sup>15</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994 rpt.) 102; Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction: 1865-77* (New York: Knopf, 1965) 80; DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* 626-7.

<sup>16</sup> *Manufacturers' Record* (22 Sept. 1893); (25 Oct. 1890); (22 Dec. 1904).

<sup>17</sup> Henry Woodfin Grady, *The New South and Other Addresses* (New York: 1904) 51.

<sup>18</sup> Grady, 53

<sup>19</sup> Rayford W. Logan's seminal study, better known under the title *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier, 1965), was originally published as *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial, 1954).

<sup>20</sup> On the rise and decline of Southern Populism see John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1961); Woodward, *Origins of the New South*: 235-290; Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Woodward relates an incident that captures the surrealism produced by the amalgamation of New South boosterism and Lost Cause mythology: Ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who had by the time of the South's surrender become the subject of popular scorn, was resurrected by Henry Grady to speak at Montgomery, Alabama in 1886. "Standing on the spot where he had taken his oath as Confederate President twenty-five years earlier" Davis told the crowd, "Your demonstration now exceeds that which welcomed me then." Woodward concludes that "The deeper the involvements in commitments to the New Order, the louder the protests of loyalty to the Old," *Origins of the New South* 155.

<sup>22</sup> *Manufacturers' Record* (28 October 1898); (26 Feb. 1903).

<sup>23</sup> See the wage scales for agricultural labor in U.S. Department of Labor, *History of Wages in the United States from Colonial Times to 1928* Bulletin No. 604 (Washington, DC: Government Printing House, 1934), Tables D-3: 228-9; G-1: 260.

<sup>24</sup> Woodward, 208; Allison Davis et al., *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (1941; Los Angeles: U of California Center for Afro-American Studies, 1988) 469;

<sup>25</sup> John A. Fitch, "Birmingham District: Labor Conservation," in "The Human Side of Large Outputs: Steel and Steel Workers in Six American States, Part IV," *Survey* (6 Jan. 1912): 1527.

<sup>26</sup> Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1947) 121.

<sup>27</sup> *Birmingham Age Herald* (28 Jan. 1907).

<sup>28</sup> Fletcher Melvin Green, "Some Aspects of the Convict Lease System in the Southern States" in Green, ed., *Essays in Southern History presented to Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1949) 112-123.

<sup>29</sup> David M. Ochsinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1997) 60.

<sup>30</sup> Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: the Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (London: Verso, 1996) 3, 73. On the use of convicts from state to state, see Ochsinsky, *Worse than Slavery*.

<sup>31</sup> On the Tennessee convict war, see Karin A. Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871-1896* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> On Alabama coal unionism, see Daniel L. Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998) and Kelly, *Race, Class and Power in the Alabama Coalfields*.

<sup>33</sup> Sir George Campbell, cited in DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*: 590; *Manufacturers' Record* (28 Oct. 1898).

<sup>34</sup> For critical reviews of the recent literature on working class interracialism see, in order of publication, James R. Green and Paul B. Worthman, "Black Workers in the New South, 1865-1916," in Huggins, ed., *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience* 47-69; Eric Arnesen, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement before 1930," *Radical History Review* 55 (1993): 53-87; Arnesen, "Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26:2 (March 1998): 146-174; Rick Halpern,

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“Organized Labor, Black Workers, and the Twentieth-Century South,” in Melvyn Stokes and Rick Halpern, eds., *Race and Class in the American South since 1890* (Oxford: Berg, 1994) 43-76.

<sup>35</sup> The same framework reveals deep divisions within the African American community as well. In her important Arkansas study, Fon Louise Gordon writes that while “the systemic and hostile nature of caste operated to categorize the black community as an undifferentiated mass [. . .] the black community has never been without internal stratification. [. . .] The black experience in Arkansas at the turn of the century involved an internal struggle as well as an external struggle against Jim Crow. Gordon, *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995) xii. For further evidence of class divisions among black Southerners, see Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power* 81-107.

<sup>36</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Mobilizing Memory: Broadening Our View of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (27 July 2001).