

An Exchange:

Oral History, the Question of Race, and the Role of Culture: A Rejoinder

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John Hinshaw's review of Pennsylvania steel communities and "memories of race," published in the special issue of *Pennsylvania History* in October, 1993, raised some interesting questions concerning the relationship between oral history and race relations in recent studies of Pennsylvania industrial communities.¹ I have even come to accept, albeit for different reasons, part of his criticism regarding work I had done on the steel making town of Homestead, Pennsylvania, included as part of Hinshaw's review. My overreliance on oral history interviews may have led me to some debatable conclusions. On the other hand, I'm not certain if interviewing more black residents of Homestead—Hinshaw's implicit remedy for my "overly nostalgic view" of race relations—while evening the racial balance, would have resolved the larger problem suggested but not directly addressed by Hinshaw's critique: namely, the limitations of oral history for documenting the thorny problem of race in industrial Pennsylvania.

As former editor Michael Birkner observed in his preface to that issue, interest in oral history soared exponentially with the "rising tide" of social history. In the 1960s, many historians perceived limitless potential for oral history to give voice to the memory of ordinary people so often overlooked in traditional primary sources. But in their haste to fill gaps in historical knowledge and to document history from the bottom up, historians who have continued to turn to oral history have unfortunately perpetuated another legacy from the halcyon days of social history and student activism: the tendency to conflate oral testimony as a source with their own political and emotional affinities for certain social groups and the concomitant desire to "empower" them.

This dilemma was highlighted indirectly by Kathleen Blee, author of the well-regarded *Women of the Klan*. Blee made an important contribution to the historiography of the Ku Klux Klan in her work, which relied heavily on information gathered through oral history interviews with former Klansmen and Klanswomen. But in a sort of postscript published in the *Journal of American History*, Blee described how she found herself challeng-

ing her interview subjects when they expressed ideas which she knew as a historian to be untrue. Too often, she found, her informants expressed "benign memories" of the Klan which contradicted their invidious activities and campaign of racial hatred. The experience caught her unprepared, but made her realize for the first time that historians generally interview groups which they implicitly seek to empower. Thus, Blee's understandable dilemma when it came to interviewing and thus indirectly validating former Indiana Klanswomen and their "life-world" experiences.²

I confess to having been guilty of this same tendency vis-a-vis my Homestead informants; because of my focus on class relations in the community (rather than in the workplace), I was far more interested in documenting the memories of those individuals who lived in Lower Homestead—who coincidentally happened to be more white than black—and implicitly, more sensitive and sympathetic to the nuances of their historical experience.³ I would expect, though, that Dennis Dickerson and Peter Gottlieb, both of whom conducted considerable oral histories among black steelworkers for their studies, could be convicted on the same charge.⁴ It should come as no surprise that historians often develop political and emotional bonds with their subjects, a condition that threatens to obstruct clear-headed analysis while at the same time supplying the moral stamina for pursuing historical truth, or some version of it.

But my point, and thus my objection to both Blee and Hinshaw, is that the methodological problems associated with oral history transcend ideology and politics, and so should our desire to correct those deficiencies. If we question the tendency of white informants to romanticize race relations or ignore the existence of racism—and I think we should question those sorts of memories, much as Blee challenged the "benign memories" of former Klanswomen—shouldn't we also scrutinize the similarly selective memories of black informants who, for any number of reasons, might conversely be inclined to either exaggerate or downplay the incidence of racism? I don't see why one group's memory is more "correct" or reliable than any other's. Rather, all oral historical evidence is fallible and should be analyzed for inconsistencies, and corroborated whenever possible with other sources (admittedly difficult in many cases), regardless of who speaks. Blee's story suggests that historians are willing to examine the memories of certain social groups for nostalgia or latent racist sentiment. The statements of Hinshaw and others suggest that they are often willing to accept, at face value, the testimony provided by groups with whom they sympathize. Such double standards hardly advance historical knowledge.

Having said all that, I'd still hold to my general conclusion regarding the nature of social relationships in Homestead: namely that race was less important than class and culture in ordering the industrial food chain.

Racism existed, to be sure, but I also believe it was part of a very complex pecking order which pitted white ethnics not only against black workers, but against white, native-born Protestants who, it could be argued, expressed more sympathy toward their black co-religionists than toward unmeltable "furriners." To conclude that white ethnics, in Hinshaw's words, experienced racism "but did not directly suffer from its petty humiliations and profound injustices" thus contradicts quite a bit of evidence that can be found on both sides of the issue. Ewa Morawksa interviewed a manager at Bethlehem Steel in Johnstown who testified that it was company policy to cross out the names of "foreigners" and ethnics on job promotion lists. That strikes me as a profound injustice that would have been deeply felt.⁵

I'm also uncomfortable with an analysis which begins with a particular conclusion—e.g., the pervasiveness of white racism— and then seeks out evidence which is thought to prove it. Take the case of black representation in the USWA. I wouldn't deny that the Steelworkers actively discriminated against their black union brothers in many instances. But in trying to account for the absence of black steelworkers in union leadership positions, I think you also at least have to factor in the role of culture in determining who got "inside" and, more importantly, who sought to get inside emerging industrial unions.⁶ Slavic laborers perceived of work and therefore of industrial unions in qualitatively different terms from not only black workers, but other white ethnics. I think this, coupled with their demographic strength, explains why the largely Irish leadership brokered power to them, and not, let's say, to Italians. Compared to Slavs, Italians were more likely to perceive themselves as temporary industrial workers and regard with a certain suspicion any institution which might compromise family or kin-based loyalties. We would be exercising poor judgment as historians if we were to ignore the ramifications of such group values and casually conclude from the evidence—the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in the steel union hierarchy—that discrimination is wholly to blame for their absence. Institutional racism, in this context, is a single bullet theory which deserves far more scrutiny than it's received.

If we're to advance the understanding and extent of racism in the history of industrializing Pennsylvania, historians have to do more than pronounce its existence. And historians will also have to strive for a more universal standard in evaluating their sources and in disciplining their well-intentioned but often sentimental uses of oral history.

History versus Tautology

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I appreciate the opportunity that Curtis Miner has provided me to discuss further how historians should approach question of race, ethnicity, and class formation in Pennsylvania. Miner argues that oral history is a useful although inherently subjective source of information that needs to be corroborated by other sources such as newspapers, censuses, reports, or even other oral histories. On this point, I believe we agree. Oral histories, like the accounts of professional historians, are forms of memory, subject to historical and political forces; they need to be interrogated and examined closely. Even professional historians can misremember facts, for instance, as when Miner claims that I argued that he painted an "overly nostalgic view" of race relations in Homestead. What I actually said was that he erred in portraying "race relations in the interwar period as harmonious."

Minor factual points aside, I take very seriously the charge that I applied a "double standard" to Miner's or other's accounts of steelworkers or steel towns, naively believing everything said in the oral histories or scholarly accounts of black workers. This charge is ridiculous. In the mid-1980s, Dennis Dickerson and Peter Gottlieb wrote monographs on the experiences of black steelworkers. While they did use oral histories of black workers, they also relied on a wide variety of primary and secondary source materials. Could and should the oral histories of black steelworkers be carefully scrutinized? Of course. But whatever the criticisms one would wish to make of Dickerson and Gottlieb, neither claimed to write a history of an entire community or of all steelworkers. Miner did, and I feel that it is appropriate to point out that his account of Homestead (published in 1989) fails to fully incorporate the insights of previous historians who were best versed in the history of blacks in Western Pennsylvania. Charging me with using double standards only deflects from the real problem that historians like Miner face: accounting for community formation in ways that fully incorporate blacks into the history of the community.

That said, I would like to highlight what I think is our most substantive disagreement, and that is over the use of "culture" in historical explanation. I believe Miner's argument for a cultural approach to questions of race, ethnicity, and class formation is of little use to historians. In his formulation, the category culture produces little more than a tautology, and permits him to avoid addressing important questions of how cultural categories and per-

spectives were established, experienced, and changed over time. Surely this latter problem is the "cultural" task confronting us as historians.

The best way to view race, ethnicity, or gender is as part of the class formation process. Unlike Miner, I don't think that "race was less important than class" in "ordering the industrial food chain" in Homestead or other steel towns. Rather, race and ethnicity were both intrinsic parts of how workers in the mills and the community were organized and disorganized. What race or ethnicity meant in practice in the steel industry is better understood as a question of power rather than culture. To take a well-corroborated fact: the initial decision by Andrew Carnegie and other industrialists to rely on immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe for unskilled labor rather than on existing sources of labor or on Southern or Northern blacks (who could work hard, spoke English, etc.) had little to do with anyone's work ethic or "culture." It arose from industrialists' calculations about how to best control their workforce as a whole. Miner is correct to point out that European immigrants experienced discrimination, but how this changed over time is of critical importance. His example from Morawska is apparently drawn from the 1910s or the 1920s. However much the memory of such discrimination must linger, the fact is that from the beginning, European immigrants were subjected to a form of discrimination that allowed them greater access to industrial jobs and generally greater access to promotions than blacks enjoyed.

How the workforce was reorganized over the period from the 1890s to the 1940s had little to do with workers' intrinsic attitudes towards work. For instance, Irish-Americans and native-born WASPs were supporters of unions in the 1890s, but as a result of employer initiatives, most had become anti-union in the 1920s and 1930s, only to reemerge as unionists in the 1940s. As Miner argues, Peter Gottlieb did suggest that in the 1910s and 1920s, black migrants changed jobs frequently. However, attributing this fact simply to blacks' attitudes towards work rather than as a response as well to institutionalized racism and familial obligations in the South would be misleading. By the 1930s, many (though not all) black steelworkers supported unionization in alliance with "hunkies," a fact that U.S. Steel used with some effect to steer native-born WASPs away from the union. In contrast to Miner's view that black workers placed a low valuation on the workplace, during World War II Pittsburgh was the national center for independent work actions by black workers—wildcats—over continued discrimination in the non-unionized workplace. Blacks (or "Slavs" or WASPs) did not evolve their cultural values as reflexes of their skin pigmentation or religion. How they were situated in the industrial order did much to shape their attitudes, not the other way around. In short, I think that looking at how power shaped the industrial workforce, community, and cultural attitudes over

time is the best way for historians to understand which groups gained or retained valuable resources such as job mobility or union offices, as well as how they developed their distinctive cultural attributes.

Miner finds it troubling that I suggested that "white ethnics experienced racism, 'but did not suffer from its petty humiliations and profound injustices.'" My point was that whites (not just white ethnics) did experience racism (as opposed to ethnic discrimination) although from a relatively privileged position that would make it difficult for them to remember how their status, resources, and indeed culture, were achieved. My point in the review essay was to encourage historians to begin to think about the racial identities of whites as well as blacks. Not discussing race because there were few black subjects in the story/community/mill cannot be excused on the grounds that class is more important than race. It merely reinforces a skewed view of class formation that fails to challenge racism in the realm of memory and representation.

My point is simply this: what I found and find troubling is the tendency for many "class" histories to implicitly accept and thereby reinforce the relative privileges of white workers. The fact that this occurs in the face of a growing body of literature on black workers makes this oversight still more problematic.

Notes

1. John Hinshaw, "Steel Communities and the Memories of Race" *Pennsylvania History* 60, 4 (October, 1993), pp. 510-518.
2. Kathleen M. Blee, "Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *Journal of American History*, (September 1993), 596-606. Blee's book is *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1991).
3. Curtis Miner, *Homestead: The Story of a Steel Town* (Pittsburgh, 1989).
4. Dennis Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany, NY, 1986) and Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1987).
5. Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
6. In his analysis of the Catholic response to the New Deal in Pittsburgh, Kenneth Heineman elaborates on this point, arguing that religion and ethnicity played a critical but largely overlooked role in shaping the ideological mission of the steelworkers union. Seeking an alternative to both communism and corporate capitalism, leaders like Phil Murray drew sustenance from a particular brand of Catholic social teachings which endorsed collective action. Protestant employers and workers, conversely, often opposed unions on the grounds that they undermined cherished notions of self reliance and individual salvation. Kenneth Heineman; "A Catholic New Deal: Religion, Labor and Politics in Depression Pittsburgh" (forthcoming, University of Pittsburgh Press).