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The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican-Americans

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would go to in defense of their racial privileges—harassing blacks who had the temerity to enter “white” jobs, boycotting integrated workplace facilities, and closing employee clubs rather than see them integrated. Finally, they say that although Title VII may have given them the legal right to better jobs, making that right effective required courage, patience, and the strong arm of the federal government.

The book contains many valuable small nuggets. Minchin presents evidence to show that many of the national chains with non-southern leadership, such as International Paper and the Scott Paper Company, integrated job lines faster than smaller, local firms. In addition, both white locals and paper companies commonly blamed the federal government for the desegregation of job ladders in order to divert resentment from themselves. This fed into the larger antagonism of southern whites toward the federal government that gave rise to the Republican realignment of the South.

Minchin also examines what he calls the generational debts and credits that the desegregation of job ladders created among both blacks and whites. Whites who now had to wait while blacks with more plant-wide seniority were promoted over them perceived themselves as paying for the sins of their fathers. They did not receive the tainted benefits of segregation that were collected by previous generations, but perceived themselves as being punished for them nonetheless. Blacks, too, had their own “lost” generation. Many blacks who had spent their working lives in the same job were unwilling to leave it, even as “white” jobs opened up. Many preferred to stay in their comfort zone and not suffer harassment by whites or the embarrassment of failing at a more demanding job. But even if they could not reach the Promised Land themselves, black plaintiffs were gratified that their efforts made it possible for the next generation to do so.

The Color of Work never loses its focus on the southern paper mill, which is both a strength and a limitation. The federal government’s determination to desegregate the industry was decisive, but Minchin never investigates the politics of the regulatory agencies, which stretch over both Democratic and Republican administrations, that were responsible for breaking the color line at work. This, however, is a mere quibble. Minchin’s book invites other historians to follow his footsteps by tracing the desegregation of other

southern industries. *The Color of Work* will set a high standard to meet when they do so.

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The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican-Americans. By Stephen J. Pitti. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 288 pp. ISBN 0-691-09287-7, \$29.95 (cloth).

A city of “marvelous ethnic diversity,” crows the official website of San José, California. Anyone who reads Stephen Pitti’s sweeping history of the Santa Clara Valley and its ethnic Mexican population will find that such a gushing claim brings on nausea rather than euphoria. Celebrations of diversity appear as just the latest in a long tradition of misleading promotional strategies that whitewash a past (and present) of racial discrimination and silence the contributions of ethnic Mexicans to the Valley’s continuing prosperity. In a narrative informed by a rich array of sources and a strong sense of indignation, Pitti trenchantly and meticulously exposes the underbelly of the Valley’s bloated boosterism.

This book is not just an exposé, however. Covering more than two centuries, Pitti tracks the changing ways in which ethnic Mexicans came to both see and organize themselves in the Valley. But it is a single and powerful thread of continuity that binds the text: the way political, social, and economic opportunities in Santa Clara Valley have been constantly determined by race—the “Devil in Silicon Valley,” as Pitti puts it. The aptness of that metaphor is plain from the first pages of the story, describing the actions of Spanish missionaries on the late-eighteenth-century Spanish frontier. Countering Valley boosters’ romantic idealization of the colonial past, Pitti vividly describes missionaries’ brutality toward their indigenous charges, as well as their insidious ideas about race, dating from the 1780s, which were to shape the changing frontier for generations to come. In the chapters that follow, Pitti tracks successive waves of U.S. settlers, officials, and industrialists and the concomitant economic transformations in the Valley, from the Gold Rush to the Silicon high. These transformations, he convincingly shows, rarely meant changes in access

to opportunity, wealth, or power for the Valley's ethnic Mexicans.

Yet Pitti carefully avoids creating a static portrait of the Valley's Mexican-origin population. While painting on a broad temporal canvas, he does not neglect the details, and pays close attention in particular to changing forms of identification and association in the Valley and to responses of Mexican and Mexican-American residents to changing local, regional, national, and international forces. Each chapter is a rich and detailed study of particular moments or eras in the Valley's history from the point of view of its ethnic Mexican communities.

A case in point is Chapter 3, a vivid portrait of life and struggle in the Valley's New Almadén mine. Pitti is superb here, analyzing the social and political world of miners—Chilean, Mexican, and Californian—who labored for their British, and then American, owners. The fine-grained study yields rich insights into, among other things, the moral economy of miners and their families (both in their work and home environments) and attacks on that economy by the Quicksilver Company. When Quicksilver took over the mine from its British owners in 1863, already abhorrent conditions worsened. The company attempted to shut down the informal economy for foodstuffs established by Latino workers who lived in the eponymous Spanish-town and impose a company store with inflated prices and rotting food. Quicksilver also created toll roads to limit the mobility of workers and their families. In this examination and in others throughout the book, Pitti astutely shows how the economic prosperity of the few in the Valley at mid-century was built not on the competition and free market values so frequently lauded in histories of the U.S. West, but on the feudalistic company stores and forms of extra-economic coercion usually attributed to the "underdeveloped" societies from which much of the work force came. At the same time, Pitti shows how, in the face of such exploitation, Chilean, Californian, and Mexican workers came together in a show of both class and ethnonational unity.

The role that Mexican nationalism—*mexicanidad*—has played in the organization of the Valley's ethnic Mexican population is a prevalent theme throughout the book. It was clearly significant to the many migrant laborers who passed through the Valley on their transnational labor circuits. (Indeed, a point that emerges with ever higher relief as one reads this book is that for the world's proletar-

ians, globalization and transnationalism are nothing new. The workers and families who move through the text are as mobile and cosmopolitan as any jet-setting dot-commer, although their itineraries are quite different: fields outside Mexicali; the mines and canneries of Santa Clara Valley; homes in rural Durango and Jalisco.) But Pitti also persuasively argues that even those who settled permanently in the Valley maintained deep and meaningful political, economic, social, and cultural ties with Mexico. Particularly interesting is his argument that the ethnic Mexican population in the Santa Clara Valley, unlike their counterparts in Los Angeles and Chicago, tended to stress an identity of *mexicanidad* rather than Mexican-Americanness well into the twentieth century. Only after World War II, when one of every four dead or missing U.S. military personnel was Spanish-speaking, did ethnic Mexicans begin to downplay ties to Mexico in order to further their claims of citizenship and equality.

To create such a rich portrait, Pitti draws from diverse source material—newspapers, government documents, oral interviews, and personal collections—and largely to good effect. However, it is disappointing that while the subjects of his study are transnational, his own research is not. Pitti's failure to consult any archives in Mexico is not a fatal flaw, since this is a regional study, but it is limiting. Clearly his subjects' own cultural and nationalist perspectives were shaped by their experiences in Mexico as well as in the Valley. As recent work has demonstrated, their perspectives were most likely also shaped by the migratory networks they established. Pitti alludes to such issues only in his final chapter, and only cursorily.

The book also suffers from a somewhat deterministic narrative, as might be expected with a first chapter entitled "Devil's Destiny." In particular, Pitti does not carefully historicize the notion of race itself. At the same time, he tends to treat populations as racially homogeneous and isolated. Especially in the chapters on the nineteenth century, it would appear that most people, regardless of class or ethnicity, were bamboozled by Beelzebub. Were the racial categories and affiliations Pitti delineates really always so unbridgeable? In the context of nineteenth-century rushing, for example, were there no powerful moments when laborers, squatters, rushers, and an array of others on the margins from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds forged effective alliances that either implicitly or explicitly challenged the increasingly racialized order? Some attention to such fore-

closed possibilities of cross-class and cross-racial solidarity might have helped make the narrative less deterministic and pessimistic.

Still, given Pitti's findings, and the fact that Ron Unz, one of Silicon Valley's most visible figures, is the recent founder of a powerful English-only educational initiative, optimism is not warranted. Website claims notwithstanding, there are clearly many who do not marvel at "ethnic diversity," and by the end of the book it is hard to argue with Pitti's conclusion that, long after the moniker "Silicon Valley" has died, race and racism will persist in the Valley. As he notes, the power of race has been the one constant—as immortal, adaptable, and persistent as Lucifer himself—in a place of substantial flux.

This is a book that is refreshingly direct and hard-hitting. Pitti states from the beginning that his perspective is resolutely "Luddite" in that he refuses to celebrate or be awed by the Valley's high-tech present. Given the sordid history of personal and institutionalized racial violence directed at non-whites in the Valley, a history that persists into the present, celebration would be repugnant. As would continuing silence. Too many historians of the Valley persist in venerating famous families and pastoral landscapes, with little mention of the mostly Mexican work force whose labor built family fortunes and cultivated lands. Stephen Pitti, however, in this work of great power and breadth, has broken the silence and given the Devil in the Valley his due.

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The Unmaking of the American Working Class. By Reg Theriault. New York: New Press, 2003. 211 pp. ISBN 1-56584-762-8, \$24.95 (cloth).

Every once in a great while, a writer comes along to give authentic voice to the passions and frustrations of working people. Reg Theriault, a former fruit tramp and retired San Francisco longshoreman, is one of those rare and gifted authors. In a crisp narrative style that evokes both the turmoil and solidarity of the shopfloor, he tells stories, draws lessons, and weaves understanding from his lifetime of experience at work.

Theriault began his compelling journey into workplace story telling in *How to Tell When You're*

Tired. Popular with students grateful for both authentic voice and narrative relief from the tedium of academic jargon, that earlier book brought a strong shopfloor voice into my own introductory labor courses. Theriault continues the journey in *The Unmaking of the American Working Class*. In a way, if you have read one of these books, you have read both. But the stories are different and the lessons more sharply drawn in the second book—and in any case both books are a great pleasure to read and well worth the time.

The core themes concern conflict, solidarity, and notions of justice in daily workplace interactions. In stories and penetrating discussion, Theriault captures the strength of spirit of workers pushed to their physical limits and moral boundaries. Through decades of daily battles and negotiation, punctuated by occasional wildcat actions, open strikes, and port shutdowns, West Coast longshoremen earned the pride, power, and decent living standards that strong unions in strategically placed industries can bring. This book demonstrates as well as any I have read why workers turn to unions and what they can gain from collective action.

At the same time, there is nothing glossy or romanticized in this account. Workers and unions (as well as companies and bosses) are served up with all their ambiguities and shortcomings. Complicated issues are addressed and sharpened—from union corruption and repressive labor law to political betrayal and the debilitating absence of an American working class political party.

Reflecting the range of shopfloor sentiment, Theriault occasionally veers away from lucid insights into either defeatism or simplistic solutions. There is little in the way of viable proposals or even hope for reversing the decline of the blue-collar working class. Instead, the author falls back on moral exhortation, such as: "We do not need an ideology to restore economic and social health to these displaced Americans. All that is required is to bring to these people that simple sense of justice and common decency that the vast majority of Americans already possess."

In the end, therefore, the message is unsatisfying. With a celebration of blue-collar work, there is also a sense that true work is disappearing along with the blue-collar working class. But why should Theriault's core workplace insights not apply to much of today's non-manufacturing work force? He mentions organized nurses and teachers as examples of service-sec-