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Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, & Privilege in Kentucky

Pem Davidson Buck

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Pem Davidson Buck's *Worked to the Bone* almost immediately lives up to its initial promise: that it will present an elaborate conspiracy theory as an explanation of the events of the last four centuries of Anglo-American history (p.4). The "elites"—who generally remain nameless—conspire to drain the sweat, i.e. the product of labor, from the non-elite majority. Indeed, this book could well bear the subtitle "Everything I Need to Know about American History I Learned Fixing Other Peoples' Sinks." The methods for this "drainage" change from generation to generation, from agriculture to industry, from local to international elites, but the paradigm remains the same, and the result is an extremely limited take on Anglo-America.

I should state up front that I agree, in general, with the broadest outlines of the thesis. That the United States was built out of a class struggle and an exploitation of the "little guy" by the "big guy" (p.3 and *passim*) and that justice, race, and gender are socially constructed, it seems to me, are beyond argument. I would venture that these views have been shared by the mainstream academy at least since the late 1960s.

But Buck's methodology is faulty. Fact after fact is presented, but her research is almost exclusively dependant on secondary sources. A survey of the endnotes of two sample chapters (Two and Eleven) contained only a single endnote citing primary source work, in this case census material (Chapter Two, n.35). Quotations are generally borrowed from other authors' work.

Interdisciplinary studies are in general a positive animal as they contribute to academic discussion; nonetheless, authors engaging in interdisciplinary work should at the very least familiarize themselves with the methodology of both disciplines. Such secondary source work as contained here may be perfectly acceptable for a work of anthropology, but as a work of history, Buck's research is inadequate. In addition, the device of maintaining the anonymity of the counties ostensibly at the center of her study (but which, if the book's attention to them is the dominant indicator, are peripheral to the thesis) may be standard in anthropology in order to protect living subjects; the practice, however, with its resultant inaccessibility of verification, is anathema to the study of history.

I take particular issue with Buck's repeated reference to the notion that "traditional" history (i.e. history written to support the social construction of the elites) remains the dominant trend in the field. "The dominant understanding of the past—an understanding shared by many Americans, the history taught in grade school, and then in gradually more complex versions through high school and often early college—is one that justifies the distribution of power in the present" (p.4). Evidently Buck has little understanding of the advances made in the discipline since the advent of the New Social History. The author goes further: "Newspaper editorials...blamed the failure of the Alliance stores and co-ops on financial mismanagement, as do some historians today" (p.96). Perhaps, but which historians? No endnote exists to back up the statement. Another example—again without an explanatory footnote—can be found on page 216: "In reality the American Dream...had come as a buyout after generations of...struggle...."

But that fact was conveniently forgotten in the teaching of history and sociology.” Strange, given the author’s reliance on the work of such teachers of history as Kathleen Brown, Peter Kolchin, and Edmund Morgan!

All too often, the reader is left wanting for more complete information or a better-developed argument. Buck’s implication, on page 170, that Martin Luther King was killed as the result of an elite conspiracy would have made for an interesting discussion had she spent more time on the subject. King’s killer was a member of the working class. Was he acting to preserve his “white wage?” And why not discuss how King’s birthday has been co-opted as a national holiday celebrating non-violence rather than militant anti-elitism? And in another unsatisfying dead-end: “With little but their sexuality to offer, some young men now are turning to muscle shirts, perming their hair and dyeing it to disguise the gray, and primping in front of a mirror, according so some of their mothers” (p.215). Added to the disturbing coupling of “young men” with gray hair, this might have served as the beginning of an important discussion of gender among non-elites, but instead the analysis comes up short. Particularly upsetting, of course, is the notion that an academic argument can be based on such an unscientific survey as “some of their mothers.”

I would be remiss if I did not mention, at least in passing, the author’s sole analysis of import: the differences between nativism and producer-egalitarianism (Chapter Eight). These overlapping categories and Buck’s subsequent deployment of them in issues regarding race, class, and gender in the twentieth century were nuanced and solid. Other than that, unfortunately, there is little here of significance to scholarly discourse. One can get a more complete understanding of the thesis—and so much more—by reading the works of two of the historians most often cited in the limited endnotes: Howard Zinn and David Roediger.

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