



Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class

By Robin D. G. Kelley

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Kelley (Hammer and Hoe), who teaches Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan, here adapts several of his previously published articles into a loosely linked study describing black working-class resistance outside traditional organizations and political movements. Studying complaints and protests by blacks on Birmingham streetcars and buses during WWII, Kelley discerns a collective effort to gain power over an institution on which they depended. Blacks who joined the Communist Party during the 1920s and '30s, he shows, helped infuse their culture into American communism. Though Malcolm X dismissed his youthful years as self-degrading, Kelley argues that part of Malcolm X's enduring appeal depended on the style he picked up from the 1940s hipster, zoot suit culture. And in an analysis of present-day "gangsta rap," Kelley describes how the music has become cartoonish and critics more sweeping in their dismissal, while the underlying conditions that spawned rap remain unchanged. Kelley's close analyses appropriately reject "formulaic interpretations," as he states, but this book is mainly for students and scholars.

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From [Booklist](#)

Kelley is a professor of Afro-American and African studies and author of *Hammer and Hoe* (1990), a look at African Americans and the Communist Party in Alabama during the Great Depression. Here he offers a bold premise that is bound to provoke controversy and comment. Kelley suggests that foot dragging, sabotage, workplace theft, absenteeism, cursing, graffiti, joking, playing "unauthorized" music, and dress-code violations are subtle and not-so-subtle but conscious acts of rebellion and resistance among a black working class that does not feel a part of "mainstream" civil rights and labor movements. His "history from below" attempts to show "how fundamental race is for understanding American culture and politics" as he analyzes cultural, social, and political phenomena as diverse as the African American volunteer role in the Spanish civil war and "gangsta" rap. This book is a must for African American history, social science, and labor collections. *David Rouse*

From Kirkus Reviews

A leftist history of unconventional resistance by 20th-century African-Americans to racial, class, and sexual oppression. Kelley (History, Afro-American, and African Studies/Univ. of Michigan; Hammer and Hoe, not reviewed) is a historian with an ax to grind, and he wields it with a will. The perspective here is that of radical historians such as W.E.B. DuBois, E.P. Thompson, and C.L.R. James: the so-called "history from below" that interprets events in the prism of class struggle. To his vast credit, in seeking to memorialize history's marginalized, Kelley has brought to the surface events and issues that need to be addressed. For instance, his discussions of blacks' early unorganized, unsuccessful fight for space on buses, of Birmingham's displaced industrial poor, and of tensions between working-poor and middle-class blacks add much to our understanding of the civil rights movement. His narrative of black volunteers in the Spanish Civil War adds a small but moving chapter to that conflict. The problem is that Kelley's leftist orthodoxy clutters his prose and numbs his perspective. Cliches like "empowerment," "refusing to privilege race, class, or gender," and "discursive strategies" drift like academic deadwood through these pages. The term "race rebels" is too elastic, ranging from workers hovering above or below the poverty line to those unmoored by lack of employment or stable families into youthful nihilism (such as Malcolm X in his "zoot suit" hustler days and "gangsta" rappers, a group to which the author ascribes inordinate importance). Kelley breezily dismisses as bourgeois such analysts of the "underclass" as William Julius Wilson. And some of his observations can be jejune, as when he sees the celebration of the pimp in the "Black Power" era as at least

partly due to ``the image of black female dominance created by the Moynihan report." Even Kelley's obvious compassion and excellent research skills are not enough when his analysis of race and class is so clouded by ideology. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

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