

Towards a New *Settlers*: A Review  
By Vincent J

Of all the words in the English language, there are two that, when put together, can cause an instant fit of infighting and discord amongst the left: labor aristocracy. Just the mention of the idea, that one working class can act as parasitic overlords over another, is seen as obvious truth to some, and blasphemous revisionism to others. Some, like Bill Warren, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, view our globalized era as one where imperial power dynamics have, for the most part, disappeared, thus putting the working class of all nations on roughly equal grounds. Others, like Minqi Li, Samir Amin, and the rest of the World-Systems School, argue that neo-colonialism and unbalanced trade make the workers of certain nations inherently more exploited than others, thus arguably giving these colonized workers a greater importance in the global revolution. Despite the variety in which these debates have expressed themselves, one essence of the debate remains largely uniform: the debate concerns nation-states, and the hegemony (or lack thereof) of one nation-state over another. This, then, poses an interesting question to explore: can there be a labor aristocracy within a nation itself, one portion of a nation's population subsisting off of another?

Certainly, there are instances where the answer is a definitive yes. The white populations of apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia both subsisted off of their respective black populations, and this in turn gave the blacks of both nations a far more revolutionary consciousness. Still, in certain instances, the question is murkier, such as in the case of the United States. Can the white population of the United States, even in its present state, be considered a labor aristocracy subsisting on the non-white working class? *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* by J. Sakai, seeks to answer this question with a definitive yes.

Of course, ever since Sakai's book hit shelves, it has been a point of constant discourse amongst the American left. Some have wholeheartedly adopted Sakai's work, and seek to place the American workers movement solely in the hands of non-white workers. Others have entirely rejected Sakai's work, and have gone out of their way to ignore the racial disparity within the white working class. This conflict has created a brutal divide within the American left, and has forced us to look back upon the book that helped bring American racial discourse to its current heights. Is *Settlers* genuinely a great revolutionary text, or is it yet another reactionary slog that erases class in favor of race?

## The History

Sakai's book is, first and foremost, a book of history. The work concerns the development of the white working class and its hegemonic relationship over the non-white population, including indigenous peoples, slaves, and Asian and Hispanic immigrants. In every chapter, it details not only the various class struggles waged by the white working class, but also how these class struggles often betrayed the non-white workers. This new revisitation of working class

history is by far the book's most interesting contribution, and is frankly devastating to many of the traditional narratives. In particular, the history of the early American workers' movement is devastatingly illuminated in this book, as it highlights the various times that nominally progressive organizations betrayed national liberation struggles. From the chauvinistic policy of the trade unions towards Asian immigrants to the Communist Party's condemnation of the Puerto Rican nationalists, Sakai makes a valid case against the rose-tinted view many hold of early American labor. The book is at its very best when it engages in thorough exposure of these often-buried chauvinistic moments. After reading the book, it's impossible to view figures like Nathaniel Bacon or Samuel Gompers in the same light again.

Unfortunately, while these portions of the book are enlightening, they are marred by both a flawed historiography and the occasional lapse in academic integrity.

Sakai's historiography is almost exclusively focused on America and its subjugated peoples. While this focus is valid for a book explicitly focusing on America, it often leads to a reified view of history in which broader historical context is missing. For instance, in the chapter "Imperialist War and the New Amerikan Order", Sakai tackles the issue of race relations during the second World War. While there are certainly grounds for critique of racial chauvinism during the war, such as the atrocious Japanese internment camps, Sakai takes this critique one step further in actively criticizing efforts to bring African Americans into the anti-fascist struggle. On the progressive support for the war, Sakai writes, "It is important to deal with the nature of the U.S. involvement in the war. Outside of the shallow and obviously untrue 'War for Democracy' propaganda, the two main arguments for the war were: 1. It was a war for European freedom, to defeat the Nazis and save the Soviet Union. 2. It was a just war of self-defense after the U.S. military was attacked by the Japanese Empire at Pearl Harbor (the main U.S. naval base in its Hawaiian colony). Both lines were often used together, particularly by the settler radicals." He then goes on to argue that both of these points were incorrect, as the Allies were actively interested in entering the war as a means of empowering their own imperialism. As he continues, "The main focus of Amerika's military interest had nothing to do with democratic or humanitarian concerns, but with expanding the Empire at the expense of its German and Japanese rivals. Not only was a stronger position over Europe aimed at, but in the Pacific a show-down was sought with Japanese imperialism."

While Sakai's objections here are not necessarily wrong, it is still ridiculous to smear the entire anti-fascist struggle, including its enlistment of colonized peoples, as just another imperial endeavor equivalent to that of the very fascists it fought. Many anti-colonial revolutionaries, including Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Chin Peng, all fought alongside their colonial oppressors in the name of crushing the particularly brutal imperialism brought about by fascism. The simple fact that Allied participation in the war was entirely self-interested does not contradict the very legitimate reasons for colonized peoples to join the fight against fascism. One reason he dismisses offhand, the argument to join the war as a means of assisting the Soviet Union, is a perfectly valid reason for a colonized person to join the struggle. Sakai's "rebuttal" to the "settler radical" argument to join the war fails to refute the progressive nature of the global

struggle against fascism, and thus we are left vindicating the “settler” efforts to forge common ground with colonized peoples against fascism. This is not to accuse Sakai of fascist apologia, he still commends the Soviet Union’s noble struggle in the war, but it still reflects the difficulties of having tunnel-vision upon a particular society when talking about something as global as a world war. By confining one’s focus to America, one misses the bigger picture of what was at stake in the fight against fascism, and why so many colonized peoples were willing to cooperate with their overlords in order to fight it.

The other glaring issue is Sakai’s sloppy, if not outright dishonest, critiques of figures like Foster and Debs. In the case of Foster, Sakai has infamously quotemined a statement by Foster to smear Foster as a racist. As Sakai writes “In fact, Foster even said that in resolving the differences between Euro-Amerikan and Afrikan labor ‘The negro has the more difficult part’ since the Afrikan worker was becoming ‘a professional strike-breaker.’ And militant white workers knew what they were supposed to do to a ‘professional strikebreaker.’” This quote is taken seriously out of context, for in the referenced work, (*The Great Steel Strike and its Consequences*), Foster is writing about the particular usage of black workers as a means of breaking a strike, as the corporation itself was seeking to inflame racial tensions as a means of diverting the conflict. As Foster writes in this same work, “The need for action looking towards better relations between whites and blacks in the industrial field should be instantly patent; for there can be no doubt but that the employing class, taking advantage of the bitter animosities of the two groups, are deliberately attempting to turn the negroes into a race of strike-breakers, with whom to hold the white workers in check; on much the same principle as the Czars used the Cossacks to keep in subjection the balance of the Russian people. Should they succeed to any degree it would make our industrial disputes take on more and more the character of race wars, a consummation that would be highly injurious to the white workers and eventually ruinous to the blacks.” To take a quote discussing the corporate goal of pitting white workers against black workers, and then using this to frame Foster as a racist who pits white workers against black workers, is sloppy scholarship at best, and outright deceit at worst. Debs faces similar treatment, as Sakai uses anti-Asian policies within the Socialist Party as an excuse to attack Debs, despite Debs himself having unsuccessfully advocated against such policies.

That being said, while this portion covering Sakai’s historiography has been overwhelmingly negative, it is worth reaffirming that much of the history he presents is still invaluable. He still brings devastating critiques of Bacon’s Rebellion, Communist Party policy on Puerto Rico, AFL racism, and much more. Overall, his historiography still makes many excellent points. It is just the few unfortunate blights, such as the confinement of history to an American perspective and the dishonest smearing of Foster and Debs, that mandate a critical lens when reading his historical account.

The Theory

As nice as it would be to confine the review of this book to just Sakai's quality as a historian, this would be missing the point. He is seeking, fundamentally, to prove the thesis that the white working class is a labor aristocracy over the nonwhite working class, and therefore the interests of the two are fundamentally contradictory. In short, there can be no white proletariat. Is he correct?

Well, the answer is quite complex. For one, we must first confirm the validity of the labor aristocracy as a concept. First coined by Engels to describe the English working class, the labor aristocracy seeks to explain why the working class of colonial powers is much less revolutionary than its colonized counterparts. The answer is rather simple: through colonialism and uneven development, the colonizing power actively enriches itself on the labor of the colonial subject. As this uneven development inevitably "trickles down" to the working class within the imperial core, this gives them a material incentive to maintain imperial hegemony. Thus, while the colonized workers will revolt against their exploitation, the colonial workers may seek to defend the interests of colonialism in order to reap material rewards such as cheap commodities. While Marxists today argue as to the exact nature of the labor aristocracy, the consensus, at least within Leninist circles, is that labor aristocracies exist to at least some extent. This isn't to say that the proletariat in the imperial core is incapable of revolution; rather, it simply means that opposition to global capitalism will always be led by exploited, underdeveloped nations like those of the former Russian Empire, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. With this in mind, it is worth considering whether or not such a formula can apply within a nation's borders, rather than between global trade blocs.

Again, we already have examples of domestic labor aristocracies in places like apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia, where the white working class actively exploited the black working class. One could also arguably make the same case for other settler-colonial societies, such as the Pied Noirs in Algeria. But how about the United States? Well, it's a yes and no answer. Firstly, yes, there are issues of labor aristocracy between white workers and nonwhite workers. The primary purpose of racism, as Sakai fully acknowledges, is to pit the races against each other, to create a reactionary settler class on the one hand, and a marginalized cheap-labor class on the other. The white working class in the United States has subsisted, in part, off of the exploitation of marginalized workers. Sakai's numerous examples of white workers betraying nonwhite workers for their own benefit, from the ravenous bloodlust of Bacon's Rebellion to the racism of the early trade unions, provides numerous examples of this very labor aristocracy. However, this is where Sakai's sole focus on the United States is a weakness. For it is worth asking whether the white labor aristocracy is really the principal economic aspect of American colonialism, or if there is another, more overbearing labor aristocracy present in American society. The answer is the latter, as international imperialism itself, through the exploitation of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, is the true basis of an American labor aristocracy.

No matter how impoverished, how exploited, how downtrodden the nonwhite American workers are, they simply cannot compare to the sheer level of exploitation faced by the third world. For instance, while African Americans are very disadvantaged compared to their white

counterparts, they still gain many of the same benefits accumulated from the exploitation of their native African kin. The sheer difference in scope between white American wealth and nonwhite American wealth is simply nothing compared to the gap between American wealth and third world wealth. This poses a fundamental question that Sakai, due to the lack of scope in his book, is unwilling to tackle: if the subsistence of the white working class off black exploitation prevents white people from leading the revolution, how can any Americans, white or black or brown or anything in between, be expected to lead the revolution when they all subsist off of an absolute deluge of neo-colonial exploitation? It's a fundamental contradiction within Sakai's thesis, and it will only grow more and more apparent as the racial gap in America erodes while the neo-colonial gap continues to widen.

So, in short, Sakai's thesis is not quite wrong, but rather is incomplete. Yes, there is, to at least some extent, a white labor aristocracy within the United States. However, this only seems to suffice as a grand thesis when one refuses to look beyond the United States. To look beyond the United States and see the broader world-system will show that all of the American working class, regardless of race, subsists off of such a massive neo-colonial apparatus that it absolutely dwarfs any racial divide within America itself. This is not to diminish racism nor is it to demonize the first world, but rather it is to point out a fundamental flaw in Sakai's thesis: if there can be no white American proletariat due to its colonial exploitation, then there can also be no nonwhite American proletariat due to their fellowship in colonial exploitation of the third world. Either we are to reject the first world entirely and look upon only the most exploited people on the planet as possible revolutionaries, or we must accept that all peoples, even white Americans, have at least some potential for revolution. Either way, the nonwhite American working class cannot be viewed as the only valid proletariat.

## The Sakaists

One of the most illuminating things about the *Settlers* phenomenon is how utterly it has affected the left. Despite being a relatively obscure book written by an absolute nobody, it has spawned an entire sea of both admirers and detractors. While the detractors can often delve into stupidpol-style chauvinism and offhanded dismissal of very real labor aristocracies, the self-proclaimed "Sakaists" are a whole different breed of revisionist and insane. I may have been harsh so far to Sakai, but it is at least fair to say that I still consider him both a Marxist and someone committed to revolution. A flawed book does not make someone automatically a traitor and a reactionary. In his "Settlers Revisited" interview, he still reaffirms his commitment to scientific materialism, revolutionary socialism, and the pragmatic realities of class struggle. As he says in the interview, "This liberal intellectual polarity that 'race issues' and 'class issues' are opposites, are completely separate from each other, and that one or the must be the main thing, is utterly useless! We have to really get it that race issues aren't the opposite of class issues. That race is always so electrically charged, so filled with mass power, precisely because it's about raw

class. That's why revolutionaries and demagogues can both potentially tap into so much power using it. Or get burned."

Unfortunately, many of his self-professed acolytes fail to meet even the slightest ounce of materialism or scientific thought. The most infamous example of this is the Black Hammer Organization, a "socialist" group that refuses not only any participation from white people, but also any hints of "white" scientific socialism! The organization just recently celebrated Marx's death and called him a "cracker" and a thief of black ideas, as they believe that colonized peoples already had socialism until evil whites came in and ruined it. This falls into the classical myth of indigenous socialism, manifesting in utopian doctrines such as "African Socialism". Ironically, actual post-colonial socialists have deeply criticized such a mythology, including Walter Rodney. In his critique of African Socialism, he writes "It is in the pre-European era that Senghor seeks his model of pristine 'Socialism' in Africa. But, to begin with, communalism was not socialism. Collective production was narrowly restricted on an ethnic, clan and geographical basis, and the egalitarian principle of distribution was limited by the low level of production so that societies came nowhere close to fulfilling the needs of all their citizens - hence Marx's description of this stage as 'Primitive Communism'. Socialism is inconceivable prior to the emancipation of man from such elementary forces as drought, flood and disease. Besides, in determining whether African communalism has any relevance in the present time, one must identify it as still persisting, i.e. the thousand year old urge to associate must not have been extinguished. In many parts of Africa, communal forms lost their primacy centuries ago with the emergence of feudal and quasi-feudal forms of exploiting labour, including household servitude." For groups like Black Hammer, who claim to know all about colonial exploitation and pre-colonial societies, they must not have read very much from one of postcolonialism's most prominent theorists.

Black Hammer, among others, have all taken a Sakai-esque path of divorcing themselves entirely from even the idea of a white proletariat, and take it one step further to refuse to engage with even the most basic and sensible "white" ideas. When most of the major theorists of scientific socialism are discarded for being white, all that's left is a thin veneer of pseudo-Maoism and a dogmatic obsession with race, one that has become entirely divorced from class or material analysis. Unfortunately for Sakai, while I would not directly place the blame on him as a theorist, he has still significantly contributed to the modern trend of anti-Marxist, reactionary demagogues who masquerade as revolutionaries. This will, for better or worse, be Sakai's legacy.

If Settlers Did Not Exist, We Would Need to Write It

Now, we are left with our conclusion: *Settlers* is an enlightening yet sloppy history book with a flawed thesis and an abhorrent legion of followers. This would usually be cause for a firmly negative review; and yet, I cannot bring myself to give it one. *Settlers*, for all its faults and all its failings, for all its revisionist acolytes and deceitful quote-mining, still remains a very important endeavor. Namely, it represents a fundamentally novel exploration of world-systems

theory within a single nation, of applying the theory of the labor aristocracy to racialized classes within a settler society. While other theorists have performed similar works (most notably Matzpen's article "The Class Nature of Israeli Society"), *Settlers* is unique in both the sheer scale of its historiographical endeavor and the iconoclasm it brings against the sacred icons of the American left. And I must admit, despite my negative tone in most of this review, it succeeds in quite a few places. It succeeds in showcasing white union betrayals, white communist chauvinism, settler identity forging the basis of modern American working-class identity, and a whole host of unsavory details usually erased from other left-wing histories. Sakai illuminates the dark underbelly of the white working class, and this itself is a fundamental achievement.

So it is such a shame to see this commendable work dragged down by character assassination, a crippling narrow lens of focus, and a fundamentally flawed thesis. Had Sakai written a more scientific work, one which analysed the white labor aristocracy alongside the broader American labor aristocracy, one which dropped the corny writing style and undertook more studious material analysis, one which presented a new vision of how to overcome these material boundaries and finally unite the workers of the world, we would probably have seen the new socialist masterpiece. We in America desperately need a theory like that, one which can properly evaluate the racialized classes of America and thus illuminate our way to a unified revolution. Unfortunately, for now, all we have is *Settlers*.

And here we are, holding this little book that has created so much strife. Is it good? Eh. I'd say it's at best a decent materialist history that needs to be read with a critical eye and a massive grain of salt. And yet should you read it? Yes, absolutely. Whether we like it or not, *Settlers*, Sakaism, and the question of the white proletariat have all become essential parts of modern leftist discourse. It is essential to read and understand this viewpoint, just so long as one reads *Hinterlands* and the works of Foster as sobering companion pieces. For now, we will all just have to read *Settlers* and dream of something better, a new version of something like *Settlers* to properly tackle the issue of American labor. Maybe somebody will come along and write this new *Settlers*, to fulfill all that lost potential and rectify Sakai's missteps. We can only wait with baited breath.