

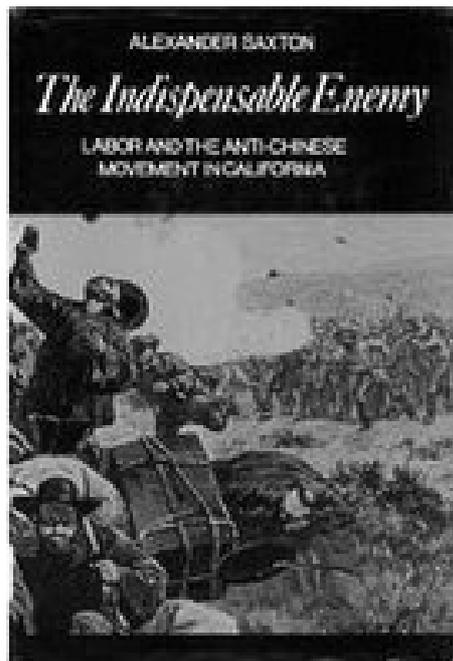
LLCE Anglais

L-3 Contemporary American History Class 2015-2016

Teacher: F. Feeley

# BOOK REPORT

"The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California" by Alexander Saxton



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## Topic: Labor unions used racism against Chinese immigrants

Railroads and industrialisation are two phenomena we enjoy today but back then, the development of the Pacific Northwest economy created divisions between classes and races. Some elites, much like modern capitalists, had business interests and dominated industries, towns, and politics. The economy of the West was characterized by a dual labor system: the whites and the non whites (Blacks, Indians, Mexicans and Asian descent). The purpose of this study is to examine the "The Indispensable Enemy" by Alexander Saxton. Nonetheless, before getting into the critic of this book which deals with the "Labour and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California", it is wiser to begin with introducing the author in order to understand what were his political and sociological point of views.



Alexander Saxton (1919-2012), was an outstanding American historian who earned a Ph.D. at the University of California (Berkeley), a novelist and a university professor who published his first novel when he was only 24. Based on the biographies that we have read, we noticed that Mr. Saxton completed many self-transformations. He went from an upper-income childhood to a working-class adulthood. Then, he went from being a Harvard student to being a Chicago laborer. His last but not least transformation, was when he passed from writing to getting involved into union organization and being a Socialist. His ultimate self-transformation sadly concerns his death at the age of 93. According to his daughter, Catherine Steele, he died by inflicting himself a gunshot at his home after being physically weakened for several years.

Alexander Saxton was a complex character and significantly contributed to the understanding of the history of labor and of race and ethnicity during his lifetime. The point of view from which he portrayed working-class men and Blacks and Whites is of immense value. His contribution is also enduring since we are still mentioning his work today, in 2016.

His first historical book is the one under analysis today: "The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California".

The anti-Chinese resentment was not a mere argument about wages; it went beyond that. The Chinese confrontation, on the Pacific Coast touches on class consciousness and white supremacy. Many 19<sup>th</sup> century labor writers portrays the Chinese as passive victims deserving what happened to them, almost like with the Indians and the slaves who were imported from Africa. But, as we will see here, Alexander Saxon had a totally different approach.

As developed in chapters 1 to 3, Chinese workers, were willing to work for far lower wages than white workers. When the Chinese arrived, they mainly worked in the gold mines, but also did agrarian work, cultural jobs, washing and domestic services and even factory works such as working in the garment industry. Furthermore, Chinese immigrants were particularly helpful in developing the transportation industry during this movement. They partook in building roads and railroads in western America thus leading to an increase in the number of Chinese laborers.

The Chinese were competitive and worked several jobs at a time in order to send money back to China to assist their families or to pay back their loans to the Chinese merchants who paid their passage to America. This rapid growth led to the Chinese constituting a much larger portion of the workforce population. A strong anti-Chinese sentiment among other non-Chinese workers quickly developed. The white workers felt like the Chinese were taking over their jobs.

On a personal note, we find it quite hypocritical from the Whites and perhaps other non-Chinese to accuse the Chinese of invading their space when in reality the large influx of Chinese immigrants was a request. The first massive importation of Chinese laborers came at the demand of the Central Pacific Railroad. Moreover, when the Chinese labor increased in number, white workers were not fired or displaced, but moved up in a better position, to more skilled and higher-up positions. Therefore, we do not think that it is important to focus of what happened but rather on why it happened: why did the European Americans hate the Chinese so much?

The hostile behaviours against the Chinese began since their arrival whereas it was only in 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was completed and in 1873 with the Depression, that job competition and unemployment really sky-rocketed. Therefore, using the job competition phenomena 20 years anterior to these two events seem incoherent to us.

In "The Indispensable Enemy" the author argues that this economic clash is not



sufficient on its own to understand the anti-Chinese sentiment that led to the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act signed by President Chester A. Arthur on May 6, 1882. Several events that happened reshaped the American immigration policy and the relationship between the American and Chinese.

After the clarification of the historical context and the breaking of this focus on job competition, the author turns to a more political aspect. As understood, the following chapter (4) deals with the ideology behind the racism. We quote p 73: "The activities undertaken were the time-honoured Jeffersonian and Jacksonian techniques of consumer boycott and precinct level organization."

Saxton finds the root of this ideological racism in the Jacksonian period.

This period was an ambiguous one and quite a controversial concept. The Jacksonian Democracy mainly refers to the dominance of Andrew Jackson and the Democratic party after 1828. However, what interests us the most is the political desire attached to slavery. Democrats argued that it was Native Americans and Blacks' inferiority that required slavery. The celebration of white supremacy that was integrated in their head makes the phrase "Jacksonian Democracy" an untrue term. After the Blacks and Indians, they were in need of a new common enemy and the westward expansion led them to the Chinese. The ideological baggage they were carrying was simply brought upon the Chinese immigrants in California. This chapter and the following ones are detailed work on the internal struggles of the working class.

To fully comprehend the relationship of Chinese workers to California labor, Alexander Saxton based most of his work on the earlier work of Ira B. Cross as well as newspapers and other documents. From what we understood, this very detailed work, can be divided into three stages: tolerance of the Chinese, outburst of racism against the Chinese and total intolerance.



Indeed, as we have seen earlier, the Chinese were brought or came to work in America. During the period we consider as "toleration", the white laborers didn't feel threatened by the Chinese. There was little competition from unskilled workers imported to work in the mines and the arduous jobs of building the transcontinental railway. With the exception of a few businessmen who developed Chinatowns, opportunities for Chinese immigrants were limited. They were paid lower wages than

White workers. Therefore, the Whites did not feel endangered but, this attitude of tolerance was soon altered.

From their arrival during the Gold Rush, the Chinese were often discriminated against and as early as the 1850s, the Foreign Miners' License Tax law was put in place. Five years later, the Chinese, just like Blacks and Indians were forbidden to testify against White men in courts. Furthermore, during the 1870s, an economic crisis resulted in unemployment problems and led to an outburst of racism against Asian immigrants. This series of events shows how the Chinese were looked down upon.

Those who opposed the Chinese immigration used prostitution, gambling and opium smoking as examples of the negative influences that Chinese immigrants had on society. The Chinese were even accused of bringing down wages and racist labor union leaders directed their wrath at them. They went as far as accusing them of being morally corrupted.

In the 1880's things got worse. The anti-Chinese movement continued to grow and gained national support. The movement is confusing because in the 1868 Burlingame Treaty with China, the American government had encouraged the immigration of Chinese nationals. Nonetheless, only over a decade later, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended all immigration of Chinese.

In our opinion, the union leaders were weaker than the Chinese. Indeed, it is easier to accuse someone else rather than undertaking actions to solve a problem. When the economic depression occurred, the racial ideological baggage they had been carrying had bitter repercussions: the boycott of Chinese-made goods, the burning of Chinese settlements and so on. The Chinese were labelled as the alien group. There was such a strong anti-Chinese feeling nationally that Chinese born in America were not granted the right to vote. The outburst of racism was so intense that by 1885, even Socialists (advocates of unity among the international working class) were disagreeing on the issue. They were either willing to deport the Chinese or chose not to identify themselves with the labor movement.

The white supremacy were the ones who initiated this immigration flux in the first place so their anger towards the Chinese is completely unjustified. The outburst of racism quickly led to a total intolerance of the Chinese race which received unfair treatments.

Now that new Chinese immigrants could no longer enter the country, the anti-Chinese movement leaders turned their attention towards Chinese who were already living in the United States. During the mid 1880's the movement became even more violent than it was

before. The hostility was growing in the two sectors that employed a huge amount of Chinese laborers: mining and railroads. After the Civil War, restrictive policies and trade union were put in place. We qualify this Anti-Chinese movement as brutal and unreasonable because people were killed and the American railway corporations exploited them to work. Yet, the general public accused them of bringing down the country's economy. The historical record of California's labor as presented in this book is not one which we can view with pride.

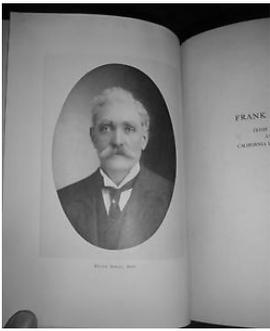
Based on the title, we thought that the book was about the Chinese but, it's not. The Chinese workers are facing struggles in California among these White workers and other groups but we don't get the point of view of these people. We don't really hear much about the White workers either. The main thing we believe should be, remembered is the violence. Based on the research Alexander Saxton did, he was able to report major incidents of violence.

Though the subtitle is "Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California", the focus is mainly only in San Francisco. Almost all of the actions that have taken place are in San Francisco and sometimes we had a hard time drawing the link between certain events and the Chinese. But, San Francisco was the political and demographical center of California for much of the 19th century so perhaps that is why Saxton focused on it.

Saxton's conclusion of chapter 1 is worth quoting here (p18):  
'Among workingmen especially this proposition [the degradation of Chinese workers:] became self-evident. The outstanding characteristic of all those disparate elements which composed the non-Chinese labor force was that they were not Chinese ... Assimilability was on the point of being discovered—that mysterious substance which resided in the circulatory systems of persons having certain ancestries and which rendered them desirable as neighbors, sons-in-law, fellow workers, and even as voters. The words assimilable, white, and the pseudo-scientific term Caucasian, just then coming into fashion, would be taken as equivalents. Before the decade of the seventies was out, there would be California workingmen, styling themselves brothers in the Order of Caucasians, who would undertake the systematic killing of Chinese in order to preserve their assimilable fellow toilers from total ruin.'

As already mentioned, there is some implication that the origins of this racism is based on the experience with racism against Blacks and the slave system but why was the emphasis on the Chinese and not another race?

Racism was used as an instrument as developed in the story of Frank Roney (p 267).



Frank Roney was an Irish rebel and California labour leader. He was a labor radical and sometimes a socialist who expressed real concerns about the excesses of anti-Chinese activism. But after an organizational failure he changed his plan of action and decided to use anti-Chinese sentiment as a tool for building the labor movement. He was arrested for anti-Chinese propaganda activity for the League of Deliverance in 1882 and was tried but declared not guilty.

Racism was already present in the population's mind and the leaders would use it to oppose the Chinese but it doesn't explain everything.

A question we still haven't solved after reading the book is: why was America on a whole against the Chinese and wanted to exclude them whereas the Chinese population was essentially limited to the far west?

In his influential history book about the Chinese labor in California during the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, Alexander Saxton only narrates the ways in which Chinese workers were cast as the "indispensable enemy," by the White workers of the period. These innocent people were seen as the most dangerous enemy that has threatened the interests of the working man. The hostility against the Chinese was indispensable for two reasons: the labor organization of the white workers and for white workers who were against the category of the non-whites (racism). And, having a common enemy sort of forged a white national identity of the "American worker". Race and racism worked hand in hand with labor in the United States.

The racism against "coolies" (Chinese workers) was crucial in keeping up with the distinction of racial categories that was passed down from slavery after emancipation.

Regardless of all this, Chinese laborers played a major role in the development of capital and empire in the United States and world wide. Therefore, in our opinion, they should be credited and not look down upon. Multiculturalism should be embraced.

As a final conclusion, we can say that although this book was published in the 1970s it is well written and particularly easy and enjoyable to read. It challenges one of the foundational stories of the labor movement. It debunks the solidarity and democracy that are usually told. Saxton showed how racism was one of labor's most important organizing tools.