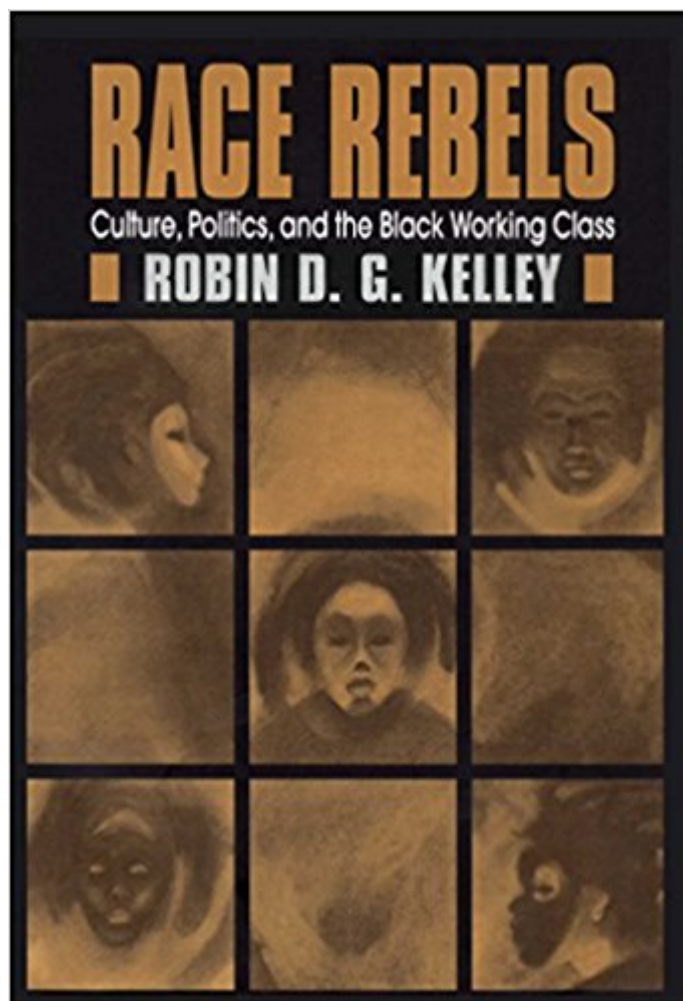


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# Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, And The Black Working Class



## Synopsis

Robin D. G. Kelley is professor of history and Africana studies at New York University and author of *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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 --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book could have been split up into chapters and read separately. There was no fluidity to it. I wouldn't say to never read it, but it was not my favorite style of writing.

This book has a really good information about African American history.

Excellent condition! Thanks!

book does appear used but still acceptable. packaging was good. this was for my history class and it arrived on time

*Race Rebels* forces readers to re-think their definitions of politics, resistance, and the relationship between social movements and everyday life. It is certainly the most sophisticated history book I've ever read. The author does a great job dissecting the struggles of African Americans in the 20th century and helps us understand why these struggles are so fundamental to American history.

Kelley highlights an underappreciated portion of twentieth century American history - the intersection of the Negro working class with the simultaneous aspects of race and class. His book delves into the interwar period, and brings back almost forgotten archives and memories. The influence of Marxist thought on some Negro activists is shown. To the extent that the American Communist Party received significant membership from Negroes. At the time, it was one of the few relatively colour-blind organisations. Of course, this very fact was used against the Communists and

Negro activists by segregationists. The book has numerous nuggets of history that might have often been omitted from other texts. Thus, you may well have heard of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which fought for the Spanish Republic during its civil war. But did you know that in that brigade were over 70 Negroes? Who saw the war as an extension of a war on racism and poverty, in Africa and the US. Kelley shows gives us their motivations and how they fared.

Have you ever, when reading something, seen a reference to another book that makes you want to read it? Then when you get around to reading it, you realize that, with the first reference, you learned everything you wanted to know about the book? That was my experience with this book. I don't even remember where I read a reference to Robin D.G. Kelley's *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, but I know my life would not be less rich had I not read it. This is not to say it's a bad book. It's a book that serves a function, fills a niche. Kelley writes as an academic (professor of history and Africana studies at NYU at the time of publication, now professor of American studies and ethnicity and history at USC), so the book is heavy on documentation and light on readability. (For 227 pages of text, there are 65 pages of end notes, a 37 page bibliography, and a 15 page index. But who's counting.) With that tone and purpose in mind, the reader can still glean an interesting take on civil rights and black history in the U.S. In a relatively small space, Kelley covers a lot of ground. I enjoyed his recounting of, in a sense, the underbelly of the civil rights movement. We all know about Martin Luther King, the march on Washington, and the high-profile civil rights leaders. Kelley reveals the under-the-radar civil rights movement. Many workers, whether domestics, dock workers, field workers, etc., performed their own small acts of workplace rebellion, including industrial sabotage, workplace theft, and simple loafing. By doing so, they claimed ownership of their own time and persons, rejecting the role of slave. I particularly liked the description of domestic workers taking, with the implied consent of their employers, food ("pan-toting"), clothing and utensils for their own use. One worker said, "We don't steal; we just 'take' things--they are part of the oral contract, exprest [sic] or implied. We understand it, and most of the white folks understand it." I was reminded of the biblical practice of gleaning, which required farmers to leave the corners of the field unharvested, or leave some grapes or olives ungathered, so that the poor can gather some for their own use. Another favorite part was the description of the ongoing, decentralized bus protests, specifically in Birmingham. Give Rosa Parks her due, of course, but she was by no means the first, and certainly not the only one to thwart the bus segregation policy. Many did, on a daily basis. Particularly troubling was the treatment of black servicemen, who fought against racist policies overseas, only to come home and be told to move to

the back of the bus. Later on, as the civil rights movement became tied to the Communist Party, I began to lose a sense of solidarity. I can appreciate the point, that many African Americans do not share a commitment to American values, given the way they have been treated historically and in the present day, but it seems like African Americans should look at the alternatives: Communism, which oppresses all people as a matter of course, or American democracy, which has unfairly oppressed a minority but has taken great strides towards true equality. I have little patience for those who side with Communism, black or white. I also did not enjoy Kelley's laudatory analysis of "gansta rap." I understand, as best a white man can, that blacks suffer from unfair treatment, and that there are discriminatory practices in law enforcement (see my review of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*), and that places like South Central L.A. have become occupied territories under police rule. But gangsta rap, when it celebrates cop killers, lauds illegal activity, and then demeans women, should be condemned, not praised, even if it is a heart-felt expression of the experiences of poor, inner-city blacks. As a country, we are a long way from being free of contentious race discussions in our public discourse. *Race Rebels* reminds us that, even though church leaders and middle class and wealthy blacks may dominate discussions of race, the working class and poor blacks in our nation are the ones who really move the culture toward racial equality.

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