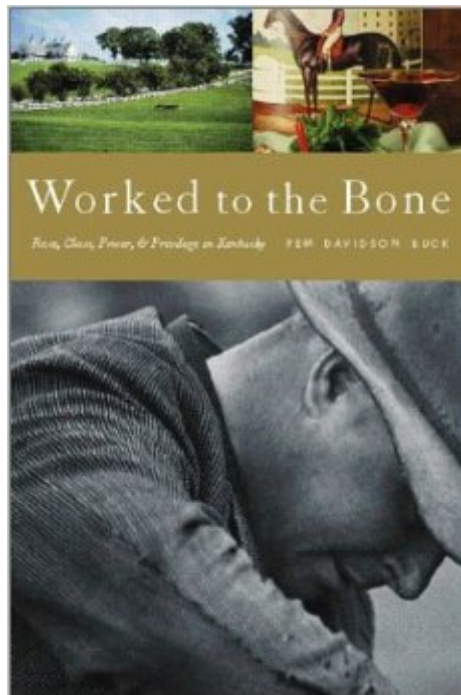


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Worked To The Bone: Race, Class, Power, And Privilege In Kentucky



Synopsis

Worked to the Bone is a provocative examination of race and class in the United States and the mechanics of inequality. In an elegant and accessible style that combines thoroughly documented sociological insight with her own compelling personal narrative, Pem Buck illustrates the ways in which constructions of race and the promise of white privilege have been used at specific historical moments to divide those in the United States—specifically, in two Kentucky counties—who might have otherwise acted on common class interests. From the initial creation of the concept of "whiteness" and early strategies focused on convincing Europeans, regardless of their class position, to identify with the elite to believe that what was good for the elite was good for them to the moment between 1750 and 1800 when most people who were identified by their European descent finally came to believe that skin color was as integral to their identity as gender, the promise of white privilege underpinned the Kentucky system. Pem Buck examines the long term effects of these developments and discusses their impact on the lives of working people in Kentucky. She also analyzes the role of local tobacco-growing and corporate elites in the underdevelopment of the state, highlighting the ways in which relationships between poor white and poor black working people were continuously manipulated to facilitate that process. Documentary material includes speeches, songs, photographs, charts, cartoons, and ads presented in a large, visually appealing format.

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Customer Reviews

In *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, & Privilege in Kentucky*, Pem Davidson Buck offers an

intimate view of social history "from under the sink," as she puts it. Her concern is with the lives of men and women whose labors typically go unnoticed and uncelebrated in popular history. Indeed, insofar as popular history books and history textbooks tend to assume the naturalness of elite privilege (such is the essence of the "great man" theory of history), Buck's study is very pointedly offered as an antidote to the orthodoxy. Her focus is on the power struggles between the wealthy and the exploited in Kentucky, and on how modern racial and class identities have been forged in the fire of that struggle. By extension, her work offers a keen analysis of the cultural formations that shape the identities of all Americans. Elites weren't born to rule, and there certainly isn't any divine ordinance guaranteeing their continued dominance. Thus, as Buck's account of Kentucky history reveals, they could never afford to take their power for granted. Their strategy historically has been to divide and conquer. From the colonial period to the post-cold war period elites have pitted non-elites against each other--men against women, Europeans against Africans, northern Europeans against southern Europeans, the Irish against the English, "real Americans" against naturalized immigrants, middle class against lower class--in order to maintain their iron grip on power. They also have had to police the arbitrary borders of human identity that they helped to create. Buck's study especially excels at showing how the ideological construction of the "white race" has helped to promote elite privilege over the last three centuries.

History is written by the "winners," the people possessing the money, the power, the control, and the victory over the subservient, weaker, poorer, "losing" groups. These "histories" tell the story of what it was like for the powerful "winners", often failing to describe the experience of the poor. History, however, has been re-written with the arrival of Pem Buck's *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, & Privilege in Kentucky*. *Worked to the Bone* tells the history of America, specifically Kentucky, from a distinctively different point of view in which members of the white, affluent, founding elite are not the heros. Rather, they are the white privileged class that manipulated constructions of race, gender, and other social structures so as to enhance and maintain their ideas of white/social privilege. Pem Buck vocalizes her beliefs in the work's opening chapter that "the future is shaped by our view of the past" and "history is a story constructed to explain the present." Her aim is to present the history of the people that have been, in her words, "worked to the bone." The elite has worked the "bony-fingered people" since their arrival hundreds of years ago. Her view depicts the "view from under the sink," the view held by the people at the bottom of the social, racial, and economic ladders. Buck's work is successful in that it traces the evolution of societal constructions in Kentucky. However, *Worked to the Bone* is lacking in its ethnographic edge, failing

to involve sufficient personal accounts, as well as its validity. Ethnographic research, such as that presented in Buck's work, has its difficulties. With ethnographic research and writing one needs to respect the privacy of those with whom they work.

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