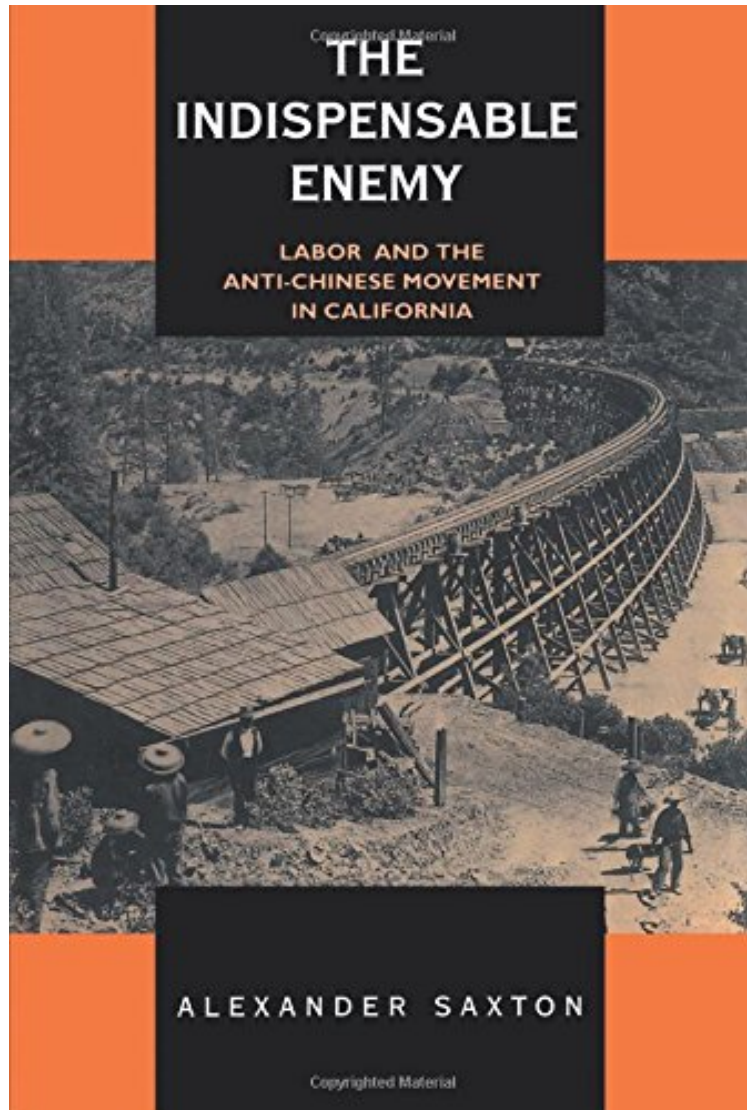


The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California

Alexander Saxton

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Alexander Saxton : The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*:

17 of 21 people found the following review helpful. California Anti-Chinese Movement Traced to Jacksonian TimesBy mwreviewIn "The Indispensable Enemy," Alexander Saxton presents a broad study of American ideological history and an intricate examination of the California political system to further a better understanding of the anti-

Chinese movement in California from the 1860s to 1902. According to Saxton, Chinese workers were "indispensable" to California for two reasons. First, the Chinese provided an important source of cheap labor for California industries. Second, the Chinese aided the labor movement in California (albeit unintentionally) by being the subject of the issue on which the majority of white workers could agree: the anti-Chinese issue. Saxton examines American ideology in the early nineteenth century to determine the roots of the anti-Chinese movement. Alexander Saxton offers a comprehensive study on the ideological origins of the anti-Chinese movement, the political importance of the issue, and the issue's future expansion to include the Japanese. The Jacksonian ideas of nationalism and racial superiority provide a clear foundation for understanding American attitudes towards African Americans and, later, Californian attitudes towards the Chinese. Moreover, Saxton emphasizes the psychological and ideological reasons for the reactions against the Chinese instead of economic reasons more commonly used by historians. By not relying on the economic motivation for anti-Chinese demonstrations, Saxton is able to distinguish the persecution endured by the Chinese from the persecutions endured by other ethnic groups, like the Irish and Germans. Unfortunately, Saxton's main points often get lost in the maze of comments about social, intellectual, and political history as well as a detailed chronological description of California political affairs. A more focused study on the anti-Chinese movement would help to underline his main points for the reader. Saxton relies primarily on primary sources for his work such as newspapers, labor publications, and memoirs. Saxton, however, does demonstrate an awareness of the limitations of such materials. Saxton also uses his sources appropriately. For example, Saxton does not include a chart on the number of Chinese workers in various occupations (as calculated by the Trades Assembly) as accurate statistical data. Saxton states that the chart is meant to show "how trade unionists viewed the [labor] situation in 1881-1882" (170). One main problem with Saxton's study is that he does not explain the actions of the labor unions from the point of view of the Chinese. He does not mention any Chinese leaders in California or the reactions of leaders in their homeland. In a couple of cases, Saxton does hint at a Chinese backlash. For example, Saxton describes Chinatown in San Francisco as a fortress protecting the residents from outside threats. In other cases, however, the Chinese are vaguely described as passive recipients of persecution (for example, the Chinese did not offer any protest against their forced removal from Eureka and Seattle). A closer examination of the Chinese side would make "The Indispensable enemy" a more complete work.

The purpose of this study is to examine the Chinese confrontation, on the Pacific Coast, as it was experienced and rationalized by the white majority. For reasons which will be evident in what follows, the main body of the work (chapters 3 through 11) will focus on the Democratic party and the labor movement of California through the forty-year period after the Civil War. The two opening chapters turn back to explore aspects of the Jacksonian background which appear crucial to an understanding of what occurred in California. The final chapter looks beyond the turn of the century to trace certain results of the sequence of events in the West for the labor movement as a whole, and to suggest the influence of those events upon the crystallization of an American concept of national identity.

From the Inside Flap "An eloquent and meticulous history of race and class which is as exciting today as when it first appeared."