

David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness:*

Race and the Making of the American Working Class (Verso 1999)

In *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, David Roediger examines the intensification of American racism in the white working classes in antebellum America. He maintains that, impelled by republican doctrine, the pressures and anxieties of industrialization and the longing for a pre-industrial past, white workers constructed a notion of “whiteness” and of white supremacy in opposition to black slavery that characterized black slaves as their inferiors.

Despite the influence of Marxist theory on his own historical development, Roediger avers that material and class considerations are not sufficient to explain race and racism. While historians such as Barbara Fields or Oliver Cromwell Cox emphasized the naturalization of whiteness and top-down racism, they have ignored the agency of the white working class males themselves.¹ Instead, Roediger draws upon modern labor history and upon the work of W.E. Du Bois’ theory of the “wages of whiteness,” to assert that whiteness formed as a tragic response to industrialization and the concomitant anxieties of the white working class.

Roediger begins by examining the origins of racism in pre-Revolution America. Noting that, while white supremacism was not universal, racism did exist. The characterization of Native Americans as lazy justified the colonists’ land grab and encouraged the white colonists to define themselves in terms of “other.”² However, declining numbers of Indians and the perception of Indians as independent limited this comparison. Thus, the colonists began to look to black slaves as the touchstone against which they could measure themselves. However, even this comparison was fraught with problems. Indenture and apprenticeship created a continuum of freedom within

colonial whites that made “attempts to connect a consciousness of whiteness with a consciousness of status” fail.³ Only the Revolution could create circumstances in which these attempts could succeed.

The “intense politicization” of American life in the years of the revolution and the semantics of republicanism saw a sea change in American racism.⁴ Republicanism embraced a fierce hatred of slavery and the importance of independence. Roediger notes that David Brion Davis sees an inability of the white republicans to think of themselves as slaves.⁵ He modifies this belief, however, asserting that they could conceive of white servitude, but that such servitude was finite. Indenture and apprenticeship were bonds to be broken. Those who did not break their bonds were weak and servile. Thus a hatred of slavery turned into a disdain of slaves themselves as the antithesis of republican ideals of freedom.⁶

With the growth of industrial capitalism in the early 19th century, republican ideals themselves came under threat. The republican principles of independence and self-sufficiency seemed at odds with the growth in wage labor. Despite the end of widespread indenture and “living in” and republican hopes that wage labor would be a mere transitory phase on the road to full independence, this was not to be the case.⁷ Working whites thus became increasingly anxious about their own freedoms. This disquiet intensified as capitalist factory owners increasingly displaced master craftsmen in the workplace.⁸ Examining the language of labor, Roediger notes that white workers rejected words associated with black slavery such as “master” or “servant,” previously used for both

¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Revised edition (Verso, 1999) 7.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 quoting David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, 1975) 279.

⁶ Roediger, 34–36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

black and white laborers in favor of less loaded words like “help” or “boss”.⁹ Yet, they also frequently used the term “white slavery” to refer to their condition.

Roediger sees both as attempts by the white workers to differentiate themselves from black slaves. In the republican society, it was “imperative not to be thought of as a slave” and so white workers clung to their whiteness as a psychological means to reassure themselves of their superiority despite their material conditions. This is, to Roediger, a tragedy for the white working classes. Invoking both DuBois and Karl Marx, he clearly believes that the psychological wages of whiteness, this sense of political and social benefits that came with whiteness in a *Herrenvolk* republic, enabled the white men of the working class to ignore their own oppression.¹⁰ In particular, for groups like the Irish-Americans, a focus upon “whiteness” as opposed to blackness was far preferable to differentiating between different ethnicities or national origins. By claiming whiteness and showing virulent racism and proslavery position, they could assert their political and social place in the republic.¹¹

This separation of black and whites in the psyche of the white worker led not only to racism but also to the popularity of proslavery positions among white workers. Despite the attempts by other historians to downplay the importance of labor in the proslavery movement, Roediger clearly believes the white workers to have agency, noting the role of radicals of the labor movement such as Thomas Man or Theophilus Fisk in the anti-abolition debate.¹² In addition, he characterizes the assumption that any proslavery came from a fear of job competition as “overplayed”.¹³ He argues instead that the structure of the white slavery metaphor, with its comparisons between white and black slavery, led into paternalist proslavery beliefs. He quotes articles from the 1830s and 1840s, scarcely believable to the modern reader, which argued that blacks were in a *better* position than whites. Efforts to

end slavery should thus focus upon efforts to improve the lot of whites before they turned to that of blacks. Nevertheless, Roediger admits that a “significant minority” of labor was abolitionist, although many of those who opposed slavery were often inconsistent and unfocused in their activism.¹⁴

Only with the approach of hostilities in the 1850s did labor begin to turn their animus towards white slaveholders rather than black slaves. Then, the rhetoric shifted from an emphasis upon “white slavery” to “free labor.” The former collapsed as whites became more aware of the horrors of slavery through the work of blacks such as Frederick Douglass and through a rejection of the language of defeat.¹⁵ This enabled a more anti-slavery stance alongside a continued emphasis upon the difference between free white labor and black slaves. Later, in post-emancipation America, Roediger notes that white labor would sometimes work alongside black. Unable to compare themselves favorably with black slaves, white labor was free to focus upon their own problems. While this did not eradicate racism, it did lead to an upsurge in labor activism.¹⁶

In a parallel and related argument, Roediger maintains that racism did not merely stem from white labor’s fears of exploitation and white slavery, but also from a sublimated longing for the preindustrial past. He contends that in the urbanization and industrialization of antebellum America, white workers had been cut off from nature and forced into discipline of work and moral austerity. Although some white workers rebelled against this new ethic, most could not for fear of being left behind. They thus internalized this discipline but could not rid themselves of the anxiety that came along with it. To alleviate this tension, they projected all of the preindustrial “vices” onto blacks. Simultaneously hating and longing for these vices, they both acted black, mocking the new values but also attacking the blacks, the defenseless targets of their frustrations. This is particularly visible in blackface

⁹ Ibid., 47–8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60, 87, 169.

¹¹ Ibid., 139

¹² Ibid., 74

¹³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 77.

¹⁵ Ibid., 84–85

¹⁶ Ibid., 175.

minstrelsy and in the blackface “masking” attacks on black targets.

However, David Brody argues that this argument has serious flaws.¹⁷ He believes that Roediger overemphasized the “sharp dichotomy” between preindustrial and industrial work. Instead, the shift would seem to be more “slow and incomplete.” This might seem a valid criticism. From Roediger’s own earlier observations, the early colonists placed a great deal of emphasis on the value of industriousness.¹⁸ The protestant work ethic of early colonial life, meshed with puritan moral values in New England, might not have disassociated the white workingman from rural life, but it would suggest that discipline and austerity were not entirely absent in pre-revolutionary America. This seems to be reflected in Ivar Bernstein’s criticism that Roediger ignores or downplays religious culture and family dynamics upon racism.¹⁹ However, not all of the workers were descended from early colonists. Many, if not most, were emigrants like the Irish who came from predominantly rural and non-industrial backgrounds with no dominant tradition of industrious virtue. In America, they filled the lowest rungs of the socio-economic scale, did most of the worst work, found the industrial discipline particularly hard and showed the most virulent racism.²⁰ Perhaps then, Brody’s criticism should be mitigated. Other reviewers seem to think so: both Steve Fraser and Jeremy Krikler accept Roediger’s argument as “sophisticated” and “powerful.”²¹

Fraser also praises Roediger’s “vivid” use of non-traditional sources, including folklore, song and popular humor.²² Certainly, these primary sources are a welcome part of the evidence Roediger uses to reach his

¹⁷ David Brody, “Review: The Wages of Whiteness,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24.2 (Autumn 1993) 379.

¹⁸ Roediger, 19.

¹⁹ Iver Bernstein, “Review: The Wages of Whiteness,” *The Journal of American History* 79.3 (December 1992) 1121.

²⁰ Roediger, 151.

²¹ Steve Fraser, “Review: The Wages of Whiteness,” *The American Historical Review* 97.4 (October 1992) 1280–1281 and Jeremy Krikler, “Lessons from America: The Writings of David Roediger,” *The Journal of Southern African Studies* 20.4 (December 1994) 663–669.

²² Fraser, 1281.

conclusions. They provide valuable, if at times disturbing, insight into the psyche of the white American workingman. In particular, Roediger uses them to analyze the semantics of the changing language of white labor to find deeper meaning. Roediger also uses an impressive array of secondary sources. While he often disagrees with or expands upon the conclusions of their authors, he is always careful to attribute their ideas within the text. He then uses them as the basis of his own arguments, scrutinizing them with a sure eye and criticizing when necessary. An interesting epilogue to the revised edition even answers his own critics and acknowledges other work in the field. Despite Krikler’s belief that Roediger is “inverting the focus of studies concerned with race,” Roediger seems to be continuing within a tradition that includes historians such as the late George Rawick.²³ This branch of modern history includes drawing upon sources and inspiration beyond the records standard to traditional history, including psychology, anthropology and sociology.

In *The Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger has gone beyond the traditional bounds of Marxist and racial theories of history, analyzing both primary and secondary sources to reach two powerful and interlinked conclusions and create a new narrative on American “whiteness” and the working classes. Firstly, white wage laborers created a concept of “Whiteness” that emphasized their differences from black slavery amidst a period of American history in which anxiety about their own status in the Herrenvolk republic was uppermost in their minds. At the same time, they both mourned the concomitant loss of their preindustrial freedoms and pleasures and were guilty for doing so. By projecting these feelings onto blacks, they could punish themselves by punishing the powerless blacks, intensifying their racial hatred and their precious sense of whiteness. This bland unity of whiteness in favor of class or ethnic boundaries led to a tragic denial of their own oppression.

²³ Krikler, 664.