

***The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, revised edition. By David Roediger. (New York: Verso, 1999. Pp. 200. Paperback, \$19.00)**

As a pioneer in the fields of labor history and critical race theory, David Roediger maintains his legacy of exceptionally deconstructed history through the problematization of race. In this revised edition of the seminal 1991 survey of whiteness in the American working class, the sincerity of the text is a treat for students of history accustomed to dry rhetorical approaches and a distanced authorial tone. Rather than assume some kind of forged “objectivity,” Roediger begins his argument from a point of personal narrative in the section “On Autobiography and Theory.” Growing up in an a small German-American quarrying and farming town, Roediger questions the fictions of whiteness, and the way Americans are socialized into race through a variety of ideological mechanisms. “Even in an all-white town,” he writes, “race was never absent. I learned absolutely no lore of my German ancestry and no more than a few meaningless snatches of Irish songs, but missed little of racist folklore.” By acknowledging the role of personal trajectories in shaping the how, when, and why of history, Roediger’s thoughtfulness snags the reader right from the start.

By questioning why the main body of white, Marxist work has “neutralized” whiteness and over-simplified race in the United States, Roediger concentrates the thematic structure of his sweeping analysis from this point of contention. The idea of “profiting” socially, psychologically, and economically, from the “wages of whiteness” is taken from the fundamental theory of W.E.B. Dubois. Emphasizing that even though white working classes earned low wages, Roediger asserts that their compensation went beyond the monetary to include a public and psychological wage. Moreover, “Status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as ‘not slaves’ and as ‘not Blacks.’”

Beginning with the post-Revolution coding of independence as a powerful masculine symbol, continuing through the schizophrenic effects of the Civil War, and focusing on the hyper-industry which saturated the Gilded Age, pinpoints trends over quite an extended time period. He suggests that the first sixty-five years of the nineteenth century marked the embryonic stage of constructing a concept of whiteness, but acknowledges that earlier “trends of mind” and colonial oppression of Native Americans constituted an important “prehistory of working class whiteness.” Drawing on the important and relatively untapped scholarship of George Rawick, Roediger controversially suggests that the formation of “blackness” and “whiteness” were concurrent.

Specifically during the period of British colonization prior to the American Revolution, the Anglo-American middle class fostered a repositioned racism, which generated a momentum leading up to the Revolution. Roediger asserts that blackness took on a powerful symbolism developed during British colonialism, which came to represent the grudging sacrifices of growing capitalism and the yearning for pre-industrial life. Consequently, the pre-capitalist ways of living were officially disregarded by whites, but projected into the once empty concept of blackness, filling it to the brim with the guilty justification of their new identities. Nevertheless, by creating a

“pornography” of an imagined former life to insure psychologically that he will not revert to the pre-industrial ways of life, a sharply constructed divide “between his reformed self and those whom he formerly resembled” was put into place. Therefore, the construction of the illusions of racial identity and superiority occurred at the same time.

Within the historical legacy of racial invention, Roediger superimposes a constrained lens to question the evolving, technological operations of racial mechanisms amidst the objects of industry, folklore, humor, song, and language used to build an insidious racial hierarchy with ultimate staying power. Surprisingly readable considering the range of theory covered, *The Wages of Whiteness* remains a classic work of American history turned on its head and a must-read for people questioning the way race operates in the United States.

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