

**The Wages of Whiteness by David Roediger**

Memo by David Eagle

Roediger develops this thesis: the US development of the industrial working class is exceptional as it took place in a slave-holding environment. Thus, the working class developed as a *white* working class. For him, as historians have long observed (e.g. Shalhope 1971) the formation of the working class in America cannot be explained solely through class-based theories, race must be added to the equation.

Theoretically, Roediger constructs his history around two central ideas. First, working class people are active agents in the construction of their identity – racism is not something imposed upon working-class whites, it is actively employed. Second, American republicanism (with its implicit assumption that blacks and women were incapable of true citizenry) was the terrain upon which antebellum white working class identity was formed.

Methodologically, Roediger uses two major sources of evidence to support his claim. First, he uses linguistic/discourse analysis to demonstrate the evolution of various terms used to describe the white working class. He shows how the word “boss” developed to avoid the word master and thus the association of white wage labor with slavery. He also traces the genealogy of the term “white slave” – particularly how this term was quickly abandoned in favor of “wage labor” and “free labor” to avoid creating associations between white workers and black slaves.

Second, Roediger analyzes cultural history, specifically minstrelsy, which exhibited strange boundary ambiguities between black and white and male and female. He avers that blackface actors allowed the working class crowds to project the values of pre-industrial artisanal and agrarian society (“the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of

life the white worker hated and longed for”) that had been replaced with strictly regulated, “[anally-retentive] capitalist and Protestant cultures” (14, 119). This claim threatens to reduce the development of the working class to a single theme. It is also spurious historically. Knowles (1995) shows that by the 1850s, the industrial transformation of the working class was far from complete. Roediger also fails to explain why Southern laboring whites, the majority of whom were rural, developed vehemently racist views. Additionally, Roediger’s analysis turns upon his claim that minstrelsy was a predominantly working-class phenomenon. Saxton (1975) argues the opposite and shows that minstrelsy was wildly popular across classes. Finally, to claim that somehow the US was unique because of its role as a slave-holding republic is to miss the fact that the US fits within “the same world-historical processes that created European nation-states and empires, built the dark satanic mills of Britain (and the even more dark and satanic sugar mills of the Brazilian Reconcavo and the Caribbean), and explained it all by means of Enlightenment rationality” (Winant 2000). All of this points to a fundamental problem with this book – it seems easier to argue from the evidence presented that racism worked *against* the formation of a working class, and instead united whites of all classes in the US into a cohesive racialized unit.

On the policy side, as a historical work, this book does not spell out a solution to the problems it names; however Roediger does aim to inject a sense of tragedy into the hopes for inter-racial solutions to labor problems. His book suggests that any solution for the problems of working class colored people must center on organizing by people of color for people of color, implementing strongly anti-racist initiatives, and maintaining attentiveness to the often subterranean power of white racism.

### References

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