Book Review

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THE ANTIDEMOCRATIC POWER OF WHITENESS

A REVIEW OF DAVID R. ROEDIGER, *THE WAGES OF WHITENESS: RACE AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS*

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Like the formally neutral concept of "civil rights," "race" usually makes one think of blacks. To link the idea of race with the social construct of whiteness is uncommon. As a rule, white Americans no longer see race in relation to their own identity, and genuinely believe that racism[1] poses a problem for "others." Nobel prize winning author Toni Morrison finds it both poignant and striking that the academic concentration on racism's targets avoids studying the impact racism has on its perpetrators.[2] But this little noticed blindness does not stop with academic disciplines. A widespread failure to acknowledge that whiteness conveys internal meanings at the same time it fulfills anti-black functions helps frustrate programs that seek to eliminate racism's pernicious legacy.[3] Thus, *The Wages of Whiteness*, a sophisticated analysis of the significance of racism in the formation of the nineteenth-century white working class, offers a welcome addition to the emerging literature interrogating whiteness.[4]

Labor historian David R. Roediger draws upon recent scholarship in social history, such as the study of gender roles, industrial disci-

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1. In America, racism is generally thought of as that intense, virulent form of hatred underlying the victimization of "outcast" groups. However, here I am using a broader definition in which racism consists of any set of beliefs that ascribe to real or imagined genetic characteristics a socially relevant character such that these differences can be legitimately used to rank and discriminate between social groups defined by race. *See* PIERRE L. VAN DEN BERGHE, RACE AND RACISM: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE 11 (2d ed. 1978).

2. TONI MORRISON, PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION 11 (1992).

3. The intense public controversy that has accompanied legally enacted programs to diminish preferences formerly accorded to whites, such as affirmative action, civil rights laws barring racial discrimination in employment, programs that promote diversity in professional school admissions, and the redrawing of the boundaries of electoral districts to conform to Voting Rights Act provisions, all testify to the recalcitrant nature of this problem, quaintly attributed to "white backlash."

4. For an in-depth examination of the legal nature of whiteness as a form of property, see Cheryl I. Harris, *Whiteness as Property*, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1707 (1993).

pline, and popular republicanism in examining the specific ways that beliefs in white racial superiority became part of the consciousness of working men, weaving mass culture, language and politics into his neo-Marxist analysis. Going beyond the obvious results in order to understand the motives of their choices, Roediger does not focus on the material benefits of 'white skin privilege.' Instead, he looks at the agency of working men themselves in constructing the meaning of whiteness. Understanding this process is crucial to Roediger because he shares African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois's conclusion concerning the deepest injury that white supremacy caused. Du Bois wrote that though "the consequences of [racist] thought were bad enough for colored people the world over," they were "even worse when one considers what this attitude did to the [white] worker. . . . He began to want, not comfort for all men but power over other men. . . . He did not love humanity and he hated niggers."[5] This passionate devotion to white supremacy holds a partial explanation for the failure of the post-Civil War Reconstruction and the collapse of its legal framework for black freedom.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that the lawyer's task was not done until "he had seen . . . the birth and growth of society, and by the farthest stretch of his reason . . . [understood] the philosophy of its being."[6] The most turbulent disputes from the American past have left their mark not only on the narrative of our history, but in the text of our laws, and on the form of our legal culture. These disputes, and their resolution, have entwined themselves into our public consciousness and thus become part of how we perceive the world around us. The abolition of slavery, and in turn segregation, provoked the most virulent disputes of all, but before any careful understanding of that legacy has been reached, complex new changes are again throwing our social and legal world into turmoil. Judges, practitioners, and legal scholars all need a better grasp of the intricate relationships between beliefs in racial superiority and inferiority and the operation of our legal institutions. The brief, provocative examination in *The Wages of Whiteness* enhances that understanding.

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5. DAVID R. ROEDIGER, THE WAGES OF WHITENESS 6 (1991) (citing W.E.B. DU BOIS, THE WORLD AND AFRICA: AN INQUIRY INTO THE PART WHICH AFRICA HAS PLAYED IN WORLD HISTORY 18-21 (1965)).
    6. THE OCCASIONAL SPEECHES OF JUSTICE OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES 22 (Mark D. Howe ed., 1962)

Indebted to the dialectical study of race and class that W.E.B. Du Bois pioneered in his classic historical work *Black Reconstruction*,[7] Roediger adopted his theme from Du Bois's formulation that the status and privileges conferred on the basis of whiteness provided compensation for exploitative and alienating class relationships,[8] that even when white workers were paid a lowly wage, they were "compensated in part by a . . . public and psychological wage."[9] Du Bois concluded that nineteenth century workers prized whiteness to such an extent that instead of joining with black workers with whom they shared common interests, they adopted a white supremacist vision that approved of capitalism and "ruined democracy."[10] White supremacy served as the unifying theme of the militant resistance that defeated Confederates mounted against the revolution that ended the political and legal structure of slavery. The triumph of white supremacy helped destroy the legal transformation of the entire political system that Reconstruction initiated and eviscerated the laws of freedom that would have extended democracy to freed slaves.

Until the 1860s, the United States was not only an expanding nation but also a slaveholding republic. In the republican vision of a nation composed of small independent producers, suspicion ran deep

7. W.E.B. DU BOIS, BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA 1860-1880 (1935).

8. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 12.

9. *Id.* at 12 (quoting DU BOIS, *supra* note 7, at 700-01). The context in which Du Bois explained why the white Southern worker accepted such low pay is worth understanding more fully. He stated:

> The political success of the doctrine of racial separation, which overthrew Reconstruction by uniting the planter and the poor white, was far exceeded by its astonishing economic results. The theory of laboring class unity rests upon the assumption that laborers, despite internal jealousies, will unite because of their opposition to exploitation by the capitalists. . . .
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> . . . .
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> Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South, and it failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interests.
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> It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. . . . The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. . . .
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> One can see . . . why labor organizers . . . made such small headway in the South. They were . . . appealing to laborers who would rather have low wages upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage. White labor saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives . . . .

DU BOIS, *supra* note 7, at 700-01.

10. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 13 (quoting DU BOIS, *supra* note 7, at 700).

both against the ranks of the powerful *and* the powerless.[11] One rarely sung verse of *The Star Spangled Banner* that Francis Scott Key based on the British military's use of mercenaries and freed slaves to burn down the White House during the War of 1812 says:

> No refuge could save the
> hireling and the slave
> From the terror of flight or
> the gloom of the grave.[12]

Back when this verse was penned in 1814, hireling was a term of disgrace. The radical ideal of republican government then eschewed dependency and elevated independence. Those gradations of dependency that whites experienced during the eighteenth century, such as apprenticeship, impressment, indentured servitude, farm tenancy and convict labor, Roediger argues, prevented the drawing of hard distinctions between an "idealized white worker and a pitied or scorned servile black worker."[13] Many eighteenth-century whites worked as servants, the same term used with the modifier "perpetual" or "negro" to describe blacks.[14] Racial attitudes during the eighteenth century, Roediger believes, were more contradictory and promiscuous than they later became given the galling varieties of "unfreedom" whites experienced as well as the popular denunciation of "slavery" which flourished in anti-British rhetoric of the revolutionary era. From 1800 to 1860, the gradual transition into an economy in which wage labor became widespread, and the class of 'hireling' expanded dramatically, produced problems for republican ideology.[15] Dependency on wages, however, was not merely compared unfavorably with the ideal form of labor but it also faced comparison with the genuine slave.[16]

Roediger explains the context in which the consciousness of a working class was developing in this way:

> On the one hand, the specter of chattel slavery—present historically in no other nation during the years of significant working class formation—made for a remarkable awareness of the dangers of dependency and a strong suspicion of paternalism. On the other hand, hard thought about 'the hireling and the slave' could make the position of the hireling comparatively attractive. The white hireling had the possibility of social mobility the Black slave did not. The white

11. *Id.* at 44.
12. *Id.* (quoting FRANCIS SCOTT KEY, *The Star-Spangled Banner* (1814)).
13. *Id.* at 25.
14. *Id.*
15. *Id.* at 45.
16. *Id.* at 46.

> hireling was usually a political freeman, and the slave, and with very
> few exceptions, the free Black, were not. The comparison could
> lead to sweeping critiques of wage labor as 'white slavery,' but it
> could also reassure wage workers that they belonged to the ranks of
> 'free white labor.' . . . [W]orking Americans therefore expressed
> soaring desires to be rid of the age-old inequities of Europe and any
> hint of slavery. They also expressed the rather pedestrian goal of
> simply not being mistaken for . . . 'negers.' And they saw not nearly
> so great a separation between these goals as we do.[17]

Roediger argues that the particular constellation of social devel-
opments and attitudes that connected "white" with worker did not
fully come together before the nineteenth century. Not until the
1860s did the process that reduced nearly one-half of the nonslave
labor force to dependence upon wages and subjected them to new
forms of capitalist discipline reach its completion.[18] Also by the 1860s
those republican notions of political and economic independence that
had inflamed the nation's imagination during the Revolutionary era
were waning. According to historian Gordon Wood:

> People in the early nineteenth century sensed that everything had
> changed. . . . [M]urder, suicide, theft, and mobbing became increas-
> ingly common responses to the burdens that liberty and the expec-
> tation of gain were placing on people. . . . Urban rioting became
> more prevalent and destructive than it had been. Street, tavern, and
> theater rowdiness, labor strikes, racial and ethnic conflicts—all in-
> creased greatly after 1800. . . . America may have been still largely
> rural, still largely agricultural, but now it was . . . perhaps the most
> thoroughly commercialized nation in the world.[19]

America's newly industrializing commercial empire in formation was
something unprecedented. As new types of production and social re-
lations emerged during the raucous transition to capitalism, the polit-
ical rhetoric of the day wrestled to define the new working conditions
variously called "wage slavery," "white slavery," or "free white
labor."

Central to the nineteenth-century worker's devotion to whiteness
was his assertion of maleness, with its perils and yearnings, and his
uncertain claim to republican citizenship in the world of men.[20] Roe-
diger's examination of the way laborers cherished the term 'freeman'
is illuminating. "[I]n an urban society in which work and home be-
came more radically separated and masculinity underwent extensive

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17. *Id.* at 46-47.
18. *Id.* at 20.
19. GORDON S. WOOD, THE RADICALISM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION 306-13 (1992).
20. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 11.

redefinition, its masculine ending may have had special appeal."[21] The word held the double meaning of economic and political independence. And in the antebellum era, "Blackness," Roediger explains, "almost perfectly predicted lack of the attributes of a freeman."[22] This suprises no one, but what Roediger's study clarifies is how important it is to emphasize that blacks were perceived as *"anticitizens,* as 'enemies rather than members of the social compact.'"[23] Thus, along with agitation to expand male suffrage to include all freemen went efforts to bar free blacks from exercising the franchise or to make the legal definition of freeman congruent with white adult males.[24]

The analysis of new meanings and words defining labor is an intriguing element of Roediger's study. The increasing use of the words "help" or "hired man" or "hired hand" to replace "servant" developed early in the nineteenth century. The decline in the willingness of white domestic workers to be called servants Roediger attributes to the egalitarian notions current in post-revolutionary America plus the obnoxious association between "servant" and the work slaves performed.[25] Roediger found that virtually all the evidence from the nineteenth century sources shows that the new usages were initiated by the workers, not, as some historians have claimed, by their employers. He quotes James Feinmore Cooper's derisive observation that "[a] man does not usually hire his cook to *help* him cook his dinner, but to cook it herself."[26] Roediger describes the new terminology for household and farm laborers as the worker's means of asserting claims to greater dignity and freedom than the term servant permitted, given the link between servility, slavery and blacks.[27]

Widespread repudiation of the term *master,* for which the Dutch word *boss* was substituted, was another innovation. Webster's 1829 dictionary, Roediger reports, did not yet include *boss.* And in 1837, James Feinmore Cooper bristled at the popular usage of "boss," claiming that " 'the laboring classes of whites' moved by a desire not to be connected with 'negro slaves' had dispensed with the term

21. *Id.* at 55.
22. *Id.* at 56.
23. *Id.* at 57.
24. *Id.* at 58.
25. *Id.* at 48-49.
26. *Id.* at 48 (quoting JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, THE AMERICAN DEMOCRAT; OR, HINTS ON THE SOCIAL AND CIVIC RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 122 (1838)).
27. *Id.* at 49.

master. . . . [But] they have resorted to the use of the word *boss*, which has precisely the same meaning in Dutch!"[28]

Tracing the transformation of slang terms into racist slurs more explicitly demonstrates the changing consciousness. As late as 1840, the connotation of 'coon' was that of a country bumpkin or city slicker. Davy Crockett's coonskin cap became the symbol the Whig Party used to identify with rural folk during the 1840 Presidential campaign. Democrats denounced their Whig rivals as "coons" using epithets like "Whig coonism" and "Whig coonventions." New York City Democrats attacked the Whigs as a "Federal Whig Coon Party."[29]

Later in the century, the blackface minstrel character Zip Coon came to personify the stereotypical irresponsible, dandified free Northern black, and by the end of the nineteenth century the "coon song" craze reached such intensity that Zip's songs sold millions of copies of sheet music.[30] The popularity of minstrel songs and black-face entertainment provided urban wage earners with a sentimental, rowdy but safe form of rebellion. Explaining the phenomenal appeal after the Civil War of the 'coon songs,' Roediger cites the work of scholars who found that this appeal lay in the songs' projection onto emancipated blacks of those values and actions that aroused both fascination and fear among working class whites. Roediger writes, "Whatever his attraction, the performers and audience knew that they were *not* the Black dandy personified by Zip Coon."[31]

The elaborate cultural disguise of "blacking up" emphasized that those on stage performing were in reality white and that whiteness mattered.[32] All whites could participate in the central joke of the minstrel show, despite their own ethnic and religious diversity, and the minstrel farce presented them with an increasingly smug whiteness. The masking process, Roediger argues, holds the key to the genius of minstrel shows, for it allowed the performer to both display and then reject the natural self in the way he could so convincingly take on and then take off blackness.[33] It also, Roediger concludes, offered the working masses an illusory opportunity to retain the joys of preindustrial culture amidst the discipline and repression associated with industrialization, social mobility, and respectability.[34] These shows

28. *Id.* at 54 (quoting COOPER, *supra* note 26, at 114).
29. *Id.* at 98.
30. *Id.* at 98.
31. *Id.* at 116.
32. *Id.* at 117.
33. *Id.* at 116.
34. *Id.* at 118.

addressed the broadest tensions produced by the creation of the first American working class,[35] and the uninhibited wildness of the minstrel performances gave the men in the audience a representation of psychological perversity that was the antithesis of the qualities associated with capitalist acquisitiveness.[36]

The late nineteenth-century neologism *"miscegenation,"* coined by the combination of the Latin words *miscere* ('to mix') and *genus* ('race'), also illustrated the way changes in language revealed the growing racist consciousness. Introduced in an 1863 pamphlet, the term was created by Democrats who sought to smear their Republican opponents, insinuating in the pamphlet that pro-Republican abolitionists would bring about race mixing. The new word soon replaced the older term "amalgamation" in the virulent political rhetoric denouncing the impending "mongrelization" of the United States.[37]

In *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger paraphrases the concept of *herrenvolk* democracy that sociologist Pierre L. van den Berghe applied to the ideology of nations such as the United States and South Africa that were democratic for the master race but tyrannical towards subordinated racial groups,[38] into *"herrenvolk republicanism."* "We should perhaps speak," Roediger writes, "of a *herrenvolk* republicanism, which read African-Americans out of the ranks of the producers and then proved more able to concentrate its fire downward onto the dependent and Black than upward against the rich and powerful."[39] The main strength of such an ideology was that *herrenvolk* republicanism reassured whites who constantly feared downward mobility, that no matter what else they lost, they could never lose their whiteness.[40] Since this nineteenth-century republicanism placed

35. *Id.* at 127.
36. *Id.* at 118.
37. *Id.* at 155-56.
38. Written in the 1960s, van den Berghe's explanation of the evolution of such regimes is based on the changes that followed the undermining of a paternalistic system of race and ethnic relations. He wrote:

> [i]n the political sphere aristocratic, colonial, or white settler regimes became transformed into 'representative' governments with wider participation in the polity, though in South Africa and until recently in the United States the democratic process was still restricted to the dominant racial caste. However, even these *Herrenvolk* democracies are clearly different from the colonial government or the planter slave-owning oligarchy which preceded them, if only because they were legitimized in terms of an ideology that could be effectively used to challenge the racial *status quo*. Thus these *Herrenvolk* democracies contained the ideological seeds of their own destruction, providing the educated elite within the oppressed groups and the progressive minority of the dominant group with a set of values to deny legitimacy to the established order.

PIERRE L. VAN DEN BERGHE, RACE AND RACISM 126 (1978).
39. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 59-60.
40. *Id.* at 60

mainly negative demands on the state, it easily degenerated from its lofty hatred of slavery into a clear disdain for slaves, and then free Blacks, and then into mere racial pettiness.[41]

The later half of the nineteenth century, when recently emancipated slaves lost all the political gains that the Civil War amendments and the Civil Rights Acts[42] had won, receives little attention in Roediger's work, but it was that era that fully brought the *herrenvolk* republic into being. The official withdrawal of Federal troops from the defeated Confederacy in 1877 represented the final abandonment of most post-war Reconstruction reforms and guaranteed the resurgence of Southern Democrats. Once restored to power, these resentful Southern politicians used the legislatures, the courts, and Ku Klux Klan terrorism to impose vicious regimes of paternalism, peonage, and segregation on freed blacks. Roediger's analysis reveals that popular commitment to white supremacy was so entrenched by the time of Emancipation, that even fundamental alteration in the political position of blacks did not remove the ingrained perception of inferiority. "But if Northern white workers developed new attitudes toward people of color only slowly and contradictorily," Roediger writes, "emancipation made for much more consistent and dramatic changes in how such workers conceived of *themselves.*"[43] The role assigned to blacks in the white worker's view of the world became more complex. According to Roediger, "whiteness" could no longer "be an unambiguous source of self-satisfaction. . . . No longer could the supposedly servile, lazy, natural and sensual African-American serve as so clear a counterpoint to white labor and so convenient a repository for values that white workers longed for and despised."[44]

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41. *Id.*

42. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery throughout the United States, and authorized Congress to pass appropriate legislation to enforce its provisions. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was the first enactment designed to protect the newly granted legal rights of emancipated blacks. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, was enacted to eliminate questions regarding the constitutionality of the 1866 Civil Rights Act. The Enforcement Act of 1870 and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 were subsequently enacted to give federal courts the authority to intervene in the vigilante actions of Southern mobs who used terrorism to intimidate the enfranchised freed slaves and subjugate them again to white control. Following the enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875.

The United States Supreme Court held that Act unconstitutional in The Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 (1883), and this paved the way for the decision in Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), that found no bar in the Fourteenth Amendment to race discrimination under the principle of "separate but equal."

43. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 175.

44. *Id.*

The Irish immigrants' fierce appropriation of whiteness provides the paradigmatic case study for Roediger's theory. Early in the nineteenth century, it was an open question among the native born white Protestants whether these Celtic immigrants belonged to the white race.[45] Vilified, segregated, excluded and castigated, the "paddy" was believed to be an inferior race. "Bestial," "simian," "savage," and "wild" were descriptions repeatedly applied to the Irish immigrant, who was ridiculed as a "nigger" turned inside out.[46] The connections drawn between blacks and Irish did not always favor the Irish.[47] The imperative driving Irish workers to define themselves as whites, despite their hatred of the British and distaste for their American descendants, was that "public and psychological wage" that whiteness promised to desperate immigrants in an industrializing society that held them in contempt.

The millions of Irish forced to come to America during the Great Famine between 1845 and 1855 helped seal the later marriage between the Democratic Party and the Irish Catholics, who brought in thousands upon thousands of largely urban voters, and used their political strength to buy acceptance as "white." Yet Roediger cautions against seeing the embrace of whiteness in purely utilitarian terms.[48] He writes:

> For Irish-American Catholics, the anxieties and the desires resulting from a loss of a relationship with nature were particularly acute. Though gang labor, cottage industry and putting-out systems had some substantial currency in mid-century Ireland, no antebellum European immigrant group experienced the wrenching move from the preindustrial countryside to full confrontation with industrial capitalism in an urban setting with anything like the intensity of Irish Catholics. . . . Torn from their homes, they resettled in places remarkably different from Ireland. Not only relocated in cities, but in the most crowded quarters of them, Irish-Americans maintained only the most tenuous of ties to nature.[49]

In part, the Irish immigrant's anguish over the divorce from the rhythms of nature and the land were covered over by attacking preindustrial behaviors as "black," and the more frantically they sought to distance themselves from blacks, the more apparent became the mixture of fascination with their repulsion.[50] The attacks by pro-

45. *Id.* at 133.
46. *Id.*
47. *Id.*
48. *Id.* at 150.
49. *Id.* at 151.
50. *Id.* at 154.

slavery Democrats on the antislavery positions of Republicans could not match the monomaniacal focus on race in the political appeals by and to Irish immigrants. Any advocacy of natural rights for blacks or abolition of slavery they attacked as "political amalgamation," and Irish politicians attacked the failure to keep free blacks out of 'white' jobs as the "amalgamation of labor."[51]

The analysis Roediger develops starts from a position black scholars and writers have long articulated: the race problem is a white problem.[52] And in Roediger's opinion the traditional theoretical approach to labor history will simply perpetuate an oversimplified view of race which sees whiteness as natural, until it recognizes how workers participated in the creation of their own racial identity.[53] Roediger points out that labor historians should be able to grasp the inconsistency of any theory that asserts that the industrial worker's racist views merely trickled down from the ruling class. This should be particularly clear now, given that neo-Marxist perspectives in which workers are seen as historical actors making their own choices and creating their own cultural forms dominate the study of the working class.[54] Yet, the new labor history remains reluctant to acknowledge the worker's participation in the construction of 'whiteness' and 'white supremacy,' clinging to variations on the presumption that economic relations produced racist attitudes.[55]

For Marxist historians, class remains the privileged category of analysis even when scholars acknowledge the deformations of race, for to them economic class seems to have greater objective validity and therefore more political importance.[56] Roediger is critical of this

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51. *Id.*

52. *See, e.g.*, RALPH ELLISON, *Beating that Boy, in* SHADOW AND ACT 99-100 (1964); W.E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS, THE WORLD AND AFRICA ch. 2 (1965); JAMES BALDWIN, THE PRICE OF THE TICKET 87-89, 251, 666 (1985); MORRISON, *supra* note 2, at 64-66.

53. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 6.

54. *Id.* at 9.

55. *Id.* at 10.

56. Under the heading of "Marxism and the White Problem," in his introduction, Roediger reflects upon the distinction historian Barbara Fields elaborated in her essay *Ideology and Race in American History. Id.* at 7-8. Race, Fields argued, is an ideological as opposed to physical fact, and thus entirely the product of history, while the reality of class can assert itself independently of social consciousness. Thus, Fields concluded that since class has objective reality and race only a spurious objectivity, they are not equivalent concepts. Barbara J. Fields, *Ideology and Race in American History, in* REGION, RACE AND RECONSTRUCTION 150-51 (J. Morgan Kousser & James M. McPherson eds., 1982).

However, for Fields, the historical dimension of race secures its permanent significance. She wrote:

> [Race] became the ideological medium through which Americans confronted questions of sovereignty and power because the enslavement of Africans and their descendants constituted a massive exception to the rules of sovereignty and power that were in-

preference, and in his analysis it is the simultaneous structural formation of the working class with a systematic elaboration of its sense of whiteness that takes center stage. "[W]hiteness," in the broadest strokes, Roediger argues, "was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline."[57] The most pressing task that social and cultural historians face, in Roediger's view, "is not to draw precise lines separating race and class but to draw lines connecting race and class."[58] The study of class must be reconceptualized, he argues, to recognize how race operates to create class consciousness.

Roediger's theoretical analysis of the meaning of whiteness to the worker's self concept will have lasting significance if its insights bring clarity to the remarkable power of racism to sustain itself. The structural economic crisis now disrupting our society is the most severe this nation has seen in a century.[59] If whiteness in the nineteenth century offered a way for the newly forming working class to express fears of dependency and anguish over the imposition of capitalist discipline, is it predictable that the fears and agonies modern day workers face may also seek expression in resurgent white male superiority? Whatever connection exists between the racially charged political rhetoric of recent campaigns and the disturbing fragmentation and decline facing the industrial worker, the abiding significance attached to whiteness is clear.

This attachment to whiteness has far-reaching side effects, particularly in light of the way race polarizes everyone. As Professor Lani Guinier has observed, Americans "have learned to see race as an issue of blame and punishment."[60] In the polarized, winner-takes-all climate of our political debate, Guinier writes, it seems there is no longer any will to do more than blame race for our problems. In some instances, among those overwhelmed by the magnitude of problems that seem to defy solutions, she writes, there is a belief that the solutions *are* the problem.[61] The assault on blacks and the poor that char-

creasingly taken for granted. And, despite the changes it has undergone . . . race has remained a predominant ideological medium because the manner of slavery's unraveling had lasting consequences for the relations of whites to other whites, no less than for those of whites to blacks.
Id. at 168-69.
    57. ROEDIGER, *supra* note 5, at 13.
    58. *Id.* at 11.
    59. *See, e.g.*, MICHAEL HARRINGTON, THE NEW AMERICAN POVERTY (1984).
    60. Lani Guinier, *Beyond Winner Take All: Democracy's Conversation*, THE NATION, Jan. 23, 1995, at 85.
    61. *Id.*

acterizes our present debate inhibits the creation of any "approach that gives working-class whites and blacks, poor people of all hues and other political orphans a . . . way to make common ground. . . . No one tries to point out," she concludes, "that the interests of minorities and the poor are integral to our collective self-interest."[62] Clearly, these spurious wages that white racism paid long ago continue to bedevil our democracy.

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62. *Id.* at 85-86.