

DAVID R. ROEDIGER

The
W A G E S
of
WHITTENESS



RACE AND THE MAKING OF
THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS

The Wages of Whiteness

Race and the Making of the American Working Class



DAVID R. ROEDIGER



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David R. Roediger

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PART I

Introducing the White Worker

‘The reality, the depth, and the persistence of
the delusion of white supremacy in this country
causes any real concept of education to be as
remote, and as much to be feared, as change or
freedom itself.’

James Baldwin
The Price of the Ticket (1985)

On Autobiography and Theory: An Introduction

When I was ten, it suddenly became possible to hit Little League pitching and, after my first (and only) five-hit game, the league's best player asked if I'd go to the carnival with him. This was a sign of acceptance, but as we walked to the fairgrounds the stakes increased. My new friend produced a long knife that he was not supposed to have and I was not supposed to know he had. 'This', he told me conspiratorially, 'is a nigger gigger.' Neither of us knew if this meant that the knife was for attacking Blacks or of a sort used by them. Neither of us knew any Blacks. None lived in the small German-American quarrying and farming town in which we were growing up. Local folklore held that laws barred Blacks from being in town after sundown. And yet the value of that knife, in terms of preteen male bonding, attached at least as much to its name as to its fake-pearl handle.

Even in an all-white town, 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. Kids came to know the exigencies of chance by chanting 'Eeny, meeny, miney, mo/Catch a nigger by the toe' to decide teams and first batters in sport. We learned that life – and fights – were not always fair: 'Two against one, nigger's fun.' We learned not to loaf: 'Last one in is a nigger baby.' We learned to save, for to buy ostentatiously or too quickly was to be 'nigger rich'. We learned not to buy clothes that were a bright 'nigger green'. Sexuality and blackness were of course thoroughly confused.

My mother's family came from Cairo, the half-Black city where the Ohio and Mississippi rivers meet, and we spent lots of each summer in a

changing Cairo neighborhood. In the early sixties, the civil rights movement came to Cairo and so did a furious white backlash. Decisive from my child's point of view was the decision of the city fathers – one was a distant relative I called 'uncle' – to close Cairo's swimming pool rather than integrate it. Since there were few white kids to play with and it was unthinkable to play with Blacks, this defeat for civil rights seemed very much aimed at me. I also noticed that Black kids my age were challenging authority in a very appealing way: they crossed streets in front of angry white drivers with all deliberate speed, and sometimes rather less.

At the time none of this made me rethink racism. My family, all workers and many of them union supporters and minor officers in quarrying, telephone work, printing, teaching and pipefitting, held no doubts about white supremacy, and I knew no antiracists through junior high school. Racial attitudes did vary somewhat, however. My father's family held to the reticent racism of the insular German small town. On my mother's side, my aunts from Cairo were far more open in their somewhat contradictory denunciations of Blacks on welfare and of Blacks taking 'our' jobs. But they also had a small paternal streak, expressed especially toward a domestic who came for a half-day every two weeks and who pleased everyone (including, I later figured out, herself) by repeatedly referring to one of my cousins as 'pretty good-looking for a white girl.' At the first sign of civil rights activity, such paternalism vanished. Nor could German reticence be relied upon. In family arguments, my paternal (all-German) relatives floated the idea that the Irish heritage of my maternal relatives was a Black one, as the 'Black Irish' had resulted from intermixing with shipwrecked slaves.

As late as my freshman year in high school I repeated to my classmates the arguments I'd heard from white relatives in Cairo – Blacks paid no taxes and therefore ought not vote. No one dissented politically, but the mold of racism showed some slight cracks. We all hated Blacks in the abstract, but our greatest heroes were the Black stars of the great St. Louis Cardinals baseball teams of the sixties. The style, as well as the talent, of players like Lou Brock, Bob Gibson and Curt Flood was revered. More grudgingly, we admired Muhammad Ali as our generation's finest sportsman. We listened to Chuck Berry and Tina Turner, both based in the St. Louis area, though not yet to Miles Davis, born a few miles up the road. A few of us became firm fans of Motown music, especially Smokey Robinson. A small signal of rebellion in high school was to have the car radio blaring music from St. Louis's soul station – KATZ.

These tastes did not supplant racism. Most of them were decidedly

prepolitical. But they did open the possibility of antiracism, and my own experiences pushed me in that direction. The city of Cairo continued to decline, now with my 'uncle' as mayor. I had developed the habit of going to church at the small Catholic church for Blacks there, originally because that church's white priest raced through mass in half the time that it took at the white church. This Black parish gradually became a center of civil rights activity in Cairo, and I increasingly was made to wonder whether whites were ruining the town, as they had the swimming pool, in order to hold on to white supremacy. The common wisdom in my hometown held that it was impossible to take buses, or even to drive, through downtown East St. Louis, a nearby city deindustrializing and becoming almost wholly Black. But three days a week, in order to play public parks tennis in St. Louis, I rode the bus through East St. Louis with no incidents but pleasant ones. My best friends among tennis players were also Black, students of Dick Hudlin, Arthur Ashe's coach. Racism increasingly just made no sense to me.

In my junior year of high school, 1968-69, George Wallace swept votes in the school's mock presidential election after a student's nominating speech, which declared, to a full assembly of students, 'I have nothing against niggers. Every American should own one.' My senior year was much spent in counselors' and principals' offices because a few of us raised the issue of racism in the school newspaper, before it was censored, and later in an underground paper. When the student government voted to send money to the Black United Front in Cairo, all hell broke loose. As we were threatened with expulsion, some of the rebellious students who had spoken most vociferously for Wallace - oddly or maybe not - became our best supporters.

Until very recently, I would have skipped all this autobiographical material, sure that my ideas on race and the white working class grew out of conscious reflection based on historical research. But much of that reflection led back to what my early years might have taught me: the role of race in defining how white workers look not only at Blacks but at themselves; the pervasiveness of race; the complex mixture of hate, sadness and longing in the racist thought of white workers; the relationship between race and ethnicity. My own youthful experiences - and they were not very different, except in outcome, from those of many white working class kids at the time - could have given me the central themes of this book. But the further tasks - of explaining how, when and why 'whiteness' became so important to white workers - do require conscious reflection and historical research.

Marxism and the White Problem

My question at age eighteen was why friends wanted to be white and why I didn't. In the two decades since, the Marxist tradition has furnished most of the intellectual tools I use, but in the main, it has not led me to press for answers to the question of why the white working class settles for being white. In my view, no answer to the 'white problem' can ignore the explanatory power of historical materialism, but neither does Marxism, as presently theorized, consistently help us focus on the central issue of why so many workers define themselves as white.

Writers of color have often raised the issue sharply, perhaps because they have had to. There is a long tradition, dating back at least to Cyril Briggs's writings of sixty years ago, of Blacks pointing out that race in the US was not a 'Negro problem' but a problem among whites. This tradition has explored the cost of whiteness to white workers, with W.E.B. Du Bois writing, 'It was bad enough to have the consequences of [racist] thought fall upon colored people the world over; but in the end it was even worse when one considers what this attitude did to the [white] worker. His aim and ideal was distorted. ... He began to want, not comfort for all men but power over other men. ... He did not love humanity and he hated niggers.' Or as James Baldwin put it, 'As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you.'¹ Nor does this tradition revolve solely around the political problems whiteness raises. The white problem – the question of why and how whites reach the conclusion that their whiteness is meaningful – is an intellectual and even an artistic problem for Black writers like Ralph Ellison, who observes, 'Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws or justice, think of sex, love, the family or freedom without responding to the presence of Negroes.' Most recently, empowered by what Toni Morrison calls the 'successful assault that feminist scholarship [made] on traditional literary discourses', novelists and critics like Morrison, Hazel Carby, Bell Hooks and Coco Fusco have tellingly interrogated the concept of whiteness. Fusco reminds her readers that 'racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American and so on; they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it.'²

The main body of writing by white Marxists in the United States has both 'naturalized' whiteness and oversimplified race. These weaknesses, and the fact that they largely reproduce the weaknesses of both American liberalism and neoconservatism where race is concerned, have limited the influence of the very real Marxist contributions to the study of race. The central Marxist contributions are thoroughly presented in Barbara Fields's

provocative 'Ideology and Race in American History'. Fields argues that race cannot be seen as a biological or physical fact (a 'thing') but must be seen as 'a notion that is profoundly and in its very essence ideological.' Race, for Fields, is then entirely socially and historically constructed as an ideology in a way that class is not. Because people really do own or not own land and workplaces, class has 'objective' dimensions. Moreover, race is constructed differently across time by people in the same social class and differently at the same time by people whose class positions differ. These latter points, not peculiar to Fields but expressed by her with considerable force and eloquence, underpin this book. They implicitly call for historical studies that focus on the racism of a class as well as of a society.³

But with certain exceptions, writers within the Marxist tradition have not often acted on such insights. The point that race is created wholly ideologically and historically, while class is not wholly so created, has often been boiled down to the notion that class (or 'the economic') is more real, more fundamental, more basic or more important than race, both in political terms and in terms of historical analysis. Thus, the pioneering Black sociologist, Oliver Cromwell Cox, writes, 'We shall assume that economic relations form the basis of modern race relations.' This view, which informed and deformed the practice of the socialist movement during its heyday in the US, leads in Cox's case to the political conclusion that Blacks and whites should look to class-based revolution as the solution to racism. Cox observes, "There will be no more "crackers" or "niggers" after a socialist revolution because the social necessity for those types will have been removed."⁴

That rosy view of a literal correspondence between racism and 'social necessity' and of the possibility of an unambiguous revolutionary solution to racism is largely gone. But the idea that class should be politically privileged has not, as is witnessed by the outpouring of recent left and left-liberal arguments that the Black freedom movement must now couch its appeals in terms of class rather than race.⁵ Nor has the privileging of class over race by any means given way within Marxist and neo-Marxist historical analysis. Even Fields wavers. At times she nicely balances the ideological creation of racial attitudes with their manifest and ongoing importance and their (albeit ideological) *reality*. She writes, 'It follows that there can be no understanding the problems arising from slavery and its destruction which ignores their racial form; recognizing that race is an ideological notion and that not all white Americans held the same ideology does not mean dismissing racial questions as illusory or unreal.' But shortly thereafter we learn that, during Reconstruction, however much 'the Republicans may have perceived the situation through the veil of ra-

cial ideology, their frustration with the freedmen had nothing to do with color.' Instead, their frustrations were those that 'have ... appeared again and again, in every part of the world, whenever an employer class in process of formation has tried to induce men and women unbroken to market discipline to work ... for a wage.'⁶ Race disappears into the 'reality' of class.

These are tricky but important matters. It is certainly true that racism must be set in class and economic contexts. Cox was right to quote delightedly Julius Boeke: 'Europeans did not sail to the Indies to collect butterflies.' Clearly, as Edmund Morgan and others have shown, labor control and land ownership provided the context for the emergence of strong white racial consciousness in early Virginia.⁷ This book will argue that working class formation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand for the US white working class. Nonetheless, the privileging of class over race is not always productive or meaningful. To set race within social formations is absolutely necessary, but to reduce race to class is damaging. If, to use tempting older Marxist images, racism is a large, low-hanging branch of a tree that is rooted in class relations, we must constantly remind ourselves that the branch is not the same as the roots, that people may more often bump into the branch than the roots, and that the best way to shake the roots may at times be by grabbing the branch.

Less botanical explanations of why the traditional Marxist habit of emphasizing class over race is not useful are in order before taking up consideration of better strategies. One major problem with the traditional Marxist approach is that what it takes as its central task – pointing out the economic dimension of racism – is already done by those in the political mainstream. In a quite meaningless way, the 'race problem' is consistently reduced to one of class. For example, when the outspoken racist and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke won a seat in the Louisiana legislature in early 1989, one expert commentator after another came on the morning news shows to announce that unemployment was high in Duke's nearly all-white district and therefore the election turned on economic grievances rather than racism. Viewers were thus treated to the exotic notion that, when white workers react to unemployment by electing a prominent white supremacist who promises to gut welfare programs, they are acting on class terms, rather than as working class racists. Such an argument is to be expected from the 'Today' show, but a viable left must find a way to differentiate itself strongly from such analysis. Similarly, it is worth noting that both neoliberalism and neoconservatism argue that race is not (or ought not to be) 'the issue' but that economic growth – neatly

separable from race – will solve conflicts that only seem to revolve round race.⁸

A second problem with traditional Marxist analyses of race is that, while trying to show the class dimension of racism, they have tended to concentrate on the ruling class's role in perpetuating racial oppression, and to cast white workers as dupes, even if virtuous ones. Communist party leader Earl Browder's account of Jack Johnstone's experiences in the packinghouse union struggles of 1919 – struggles in which the working class was deeply split by race – provides one revealing, if extreme, example:

... all obstacles to unity and solidarity came not from either group of workers themselves, but from the enemies of the working class – from the capitalist press, from the bosses, from the bourgeois politicians ... and from the reactionary A.F. of L. officialdom.⁹

Cox echoes this view in theoretical language. Racism, he argues, is 'the socio-attitudinal concomitant of the racial exploitative practice of a ruling class in a capitalistic society.' Or again, in writing of the Jim Crow system in the South, he explains that 'every segregation barrier is a barrier put up between white and black people by their exploiters.' Cox later adds that it was the exploiters who maintained those barriers.¹⁰ The workers, in this view, largely receive and occasionally resist racist ideas and practices but have no role in *creating* those practices.

The neo-Marxist perspectives that have in the past twenty years come to dominate the study of the working class, personified in the US by Herbert Gutman and in Britain by E.P. Thompson, should help us call into question any theory that holds that racism simply trickles down the class structure from the commanding heights at which it is created. The 'new labor history', whatever its weaknesses, has made the tremendous political and analytical contribution of showing that workers, even during periods of firm ruling class hegemony, are historical actors who make (constrained) choices and create their own cultural forms.

However, for reasons I have tried to explore elsewhere,¹¹ the new labor history has hesitated to explore working class 'whiteness' and white supremacy as creations, in part, of the white working class itself. Few historians would adopt an outlook that simply characterizes racism, as Communist party chair Gus Hall does, as monopoly capital's 'deliberate strategy for superprofits'.¹² Some have, wrongly I think, even suggested that capital and the state do not foster racism, or that capital does not profit from racism and acts to see racism ended.¹³ But movements away from conspiratorial views of racism and toward a consideration of the

agency of the working class in the social construction of race have not resulted in many class-specific studies of racism. The valuable general histories of racism, especially those by George Fredrickson and Thomas Gossett, rely mainly on evidence from political leaders, intellectuals and scientists.¹⁴ Equally useful studies of race and popular culture generally do not explore the difficult question of the specific role of the working class in creating popular cultural treatments of race nor the specific meanings of racism in popular culture for workers.¹⁵ Studies bringing race and labor together, including the pioneering work of Herbert Hill and Philip Foner, mainly stay on the terrain of trade union practices regarding race.¹⁶ When the motivations of the white working class in accepting racism are considered, overly simple economic explanations hinging on advantages of 'white skin privilege' within the labor market too easily prevail.¹⁷

Nor are the efforts of historically minded economists and sociologists wholly satisfying in providing alternative interpretations. The 'segmentation' theories of Michael Reich, David Gordon, Richard Edwards and others make the useful point that racism benefits the capitalist class, but at times in language so careful to avoid any notion of conspiracy that it is clear they are not offering a theory of racism but an empirical observation about racism. Reich, for example, writes, 'Capitalists benefit from racial divisions whether or not they have individually or collectively practiced racial discrimination.' The other major socioeconomic model for discussing racism emphasizes split labor markets, which are seen as vexing to capital and as benefiting 'dominant workers' against 'cheap labor'. But this theory at best explains the results, not the origins, of white working class privilege. Edna Bonacich, the most prominent theorist of split labor markets, holds that the 'dominant workers' did not originally gain their position by racially exclusionist movements but rather by 'historical accident'. Typically, neither segmentation theory nor split labor market theories offer the possibility that racism comes from both above and below. Neither entertains the possibility that racism is not a matter of bread alone, but is in addition a way in which white workers have come to look at the world.¹⁸

There are signs, in the ongoing work of such scholars as Gwendolyn Mink, Robin D.G. Kelley, Eric Arnesen, Dan Letwin, Joseph Trotter, Dolores Janiewski, Roger Horowitz, Michael Honey, Daniel Rosenberg and, above all, Alexander Saxton, that a flowering of a new social and cultural history of race and labor may be beginning. Certainly the new areas opened by scholars in social history – the study of gender, of popular republicanism and of the roles of labor control and industrial discipline in class formation, for example – make possible far more sophisticated

studies of working class racism. Indeed, this study begins with the insights of the new labor history and is within that broad tradition. In many ways it represents an attempt to apply to the question of race relations scholarship that takes the agency of working class people seriously. It sees working class whiteness as a gendered phenomenon, particularly expressing and repressing male longings and the perils and pride of republican citizenship among men. To the extent that it can range widely over space, time and subject matter – frankly depending on secondary accounts supplemented by primary research – it rests on the rich, if too often separated, bodies of historical writing on class and on race in the United States.

But some of the old problems found in the work of Oliver Cox still recur in recent labor historiography. Perhaps most serious is the continuing tendency to romanticize members of the white working class by not posing the problem of why they came to consider themselves white and with what results. As the Black historian Nell Irvin Painter has recently remarked:

They [US labor historians] often prefer to wrap themselves in fashionable Europeanisms and to write as though their favorite, northern, European-American workers lived out their destinies divorced from slavery and racism, as though, say, Chartism meant more in the history of the American working class than slavery.¹⁹

Painter's observations bring us nicely back to the suppressed question of whiteness and the need for Marxists to fully reconceptualize the study of race and class. There can be no assumption that the whiteness of the white working class deserves exploration only when we begin to discuss the history of race relations in labor organizations. Rather, race has at all times been a critical factor in the history of US class formation.

The Essential Du Bois

The analysis offered in the preceding section suggests that, at least in the US, the most pressing task for historians of race and class is not to draw precise lines separating race and class but to draw lines connecting race and class. We can get this attention to how race and class interpenetrate from several sources – for example, in the best of Stuart Hall's and Alexander Saxton's works, and to an extent in recent studies of 'racial formation'²⁰ – but no body of thought rivals that of W.E.B. Du Bois for an understanding of the dynamics, indeed dialectics, of race and class in