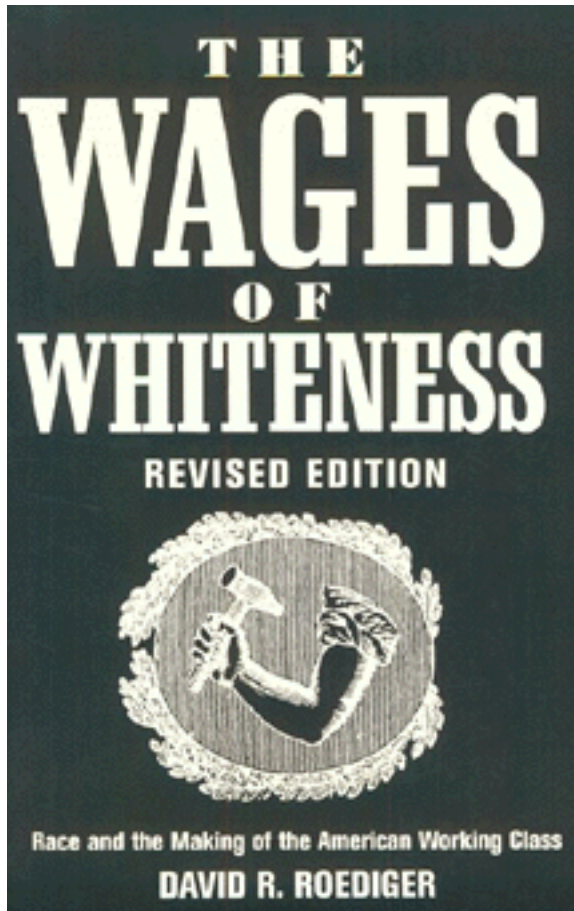


On Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*

Theodore W. Allen¹



David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* -- a psycho-cultural investigation of the development of "white" identity among European-American workers in the North during the ante-bellum period -- was originally published in 1991 and was republished as a revised edition in 1999. The revision consisted entirely of a five-page "Afterword"; the book otherwise remained unchanged. Roediger divides his book into four parts. In Part I, in Chapter 1, Roediger sets forth the conceptual approach to his subject, posing a set of questions of key importance that he has found Marxist labor historians to have ignored, or neglected, or misconceived: 1) "the role of race in defining how white workers look not only at Blacks but at themselves"; 2) "the pervasiveness of race"; 3) "the complex mixture of hate, sadness and longing in the racist thought of white workers"; 4) the relationship between race and ethnicity."² "Marxism as presently

theorized," he says, does not help us focus on "why so many workers define themselves as white."³ He classifies Marxist and presumably Marx-influenced writings into two categories, the "traditional Marxists," who are distinguished by their emphasis on class, combined with a subordination of "race;" and the "neo-Marxists," who subscribe to the perspectives of E. P. Thompson in Britain and Herbert Gutman in the United States, whom he credits with opening the way for the emergence of "a new labor history," particularly by "call[ing] into question any theory that holds that racism simply trickles down the class structure from the commanding heights at which it is created."⁴ A set of "new labor historians" has emerged who are awake to the viciousness of "whiteness" in the labor movement.⁵ These new historians take the working class as a self-motivated agency of history, says Roediger, but their works are flawed by a "tendency to romanticize members of the white working class, by not posing the problem of why they came to consider themselves white. David takes on the task of correcting this error by his thesis that white supremacy was "in part" a creation of the European-American

workers, in the early nineteenth century. Chapter two, referring to the Anglo-American colonial period, speaks of "The Prehistory of the White Worker."

Part II introduces white identity in "the language of class," wherein the European-American artisans responded to the threat of extinction by capitalist enterprise by an appeal to a "whites-only" republicanism. Part III relates the growing industrialization to the development of a "white" culture, the emergence of "whiteness." Unskilled European immigrant peasant recruits, resentful of the routine discipline of industrial employment, consoled themselves with the social distinction of being free and citizens. Special attention is given to laboring-class Irish-Americans who, the author says, combined their political and economic motives with an "unthinking decision" rooted in repressed sexual fantasies which they projected onto their image of African-Americans. Part IV argues that in the Civil War and Post-Emancipation periods there was a degree of moderation of "white" workers' "tendency to equate Blackness with servility." (174) In the end, however, European-Americans were still governed by "fears" of equality and of "sexual amalgamation." (172) The Black workers had much to contribute to the development of a labor movement, and the struggle for the eight-hour day in particular, but "the gift was spurned by white labor."

In his "Afterword" to the second edition, Roediger, with exemplary professional courage and integrity, acknowledges errors committed in the original edition. Some unspecified sections of the first edition, he notes, were "embarrassingly thin." He refers to "many shortcomings," for which he presumes others will be able to make amends without much difficulty. But there is one, major, error that he "sharply regrets," and for which he foresees no simple and easy amendment. That error, he says, was his acceptance of "the dominant assumption...[,] the unexamined and indefensible notion that white males were somehow 'the American working class.'" Reflecting on this "flat mistake," he recalls that he himself had expressed a contrary view. He frankly attributes the error to the effect of his "White Blindspot." This political disability, he goes on to say, incidentally caused the tone of the book to be unduly pessimistic.⁶

He takes note of favorable commentaries on his book by Dana Frank⁷ and by Staughton Lynd.⁸ Both of these reviewers, however, suggest that Roediger's treatment of the complicity of European-American working people in white supremacy, may, contrary to the author's intentions, encourage an abandonment of faith in labor becoming "a powerful agent for social change." Frank tells of her students who, after reading *Wages*, found that it offered little hope for labor's cause because, they said, "white working people have so consistently and inevitably acted on their racial interests."⁹ Frank's misgivings were shared by nearly all reviewers. In addition to the comments of Frank and Lynd, Roediger lists seventeen other reviews.(p. 200) With the exception of the two¹⁰ that I have not yet seen, I have read them all carefully, as well as four that were not listed there.¹¹ While all but one¹² were sympathetic to Roediger's argument,¹³ a frequent conclusion was that Roediger had posed a problem but left no hope for its solution. It would seem that Roediger's reaction to Dana Frank's review should have been reinforced by the tone of these reviews. Although Frank had defended Roediger against

her students' despairing interpretation of his work, Roediger is compelled to note that "the fact that it requires such a defense is telling."[14](#)

The "Afterword," be it noted, makes no attempt to explore the possibility of relationships among three major points in David's reexamination of the work. First, how does he explain the lapse that led him to marginalize the Black workers in his concept of "the American working class"? What were the influences and the subjective factors that caused him to make this "flat mistake"? In finding the answer or answers to that question, perhaps David would save himself and others from repeating that lapse. Secondly, what relation may there be between his acknowledged white blind-spot and the consensus among sympathetic critics regarding what Roediger, himself, now calls the "unduly pessimistic" tone of the work? Thirdly, David attaches great importance to the prospect that the increasing proportion of women in the labor force will be a major factor in the struggle against white supremacy. But neither in the Afterword nor in the book proper does David seek to discuss the relationship between the struggle against male supremacy and white supremacy.

In the second paragraph of the Afterword, David says frankly that his book "was designed as a provocation," and he generally encourages what his critical readers may offer by way of "elaboration, challenge and correction." This essay is intended as an equally frank and generous spirit.[15](#)

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM'S WHITE BLINDSPOT

As I started reading David's book, I presumed that as a historian, he was concerned with the degree to which, in E. P. Thompson's phrase, "the working people's consciousness of their interests and of their predicament as a class"[16](#) has been expressed by European-American workers generally. For a century and more now, general historians, as well as labor and socialist specialists, have sought to explain the disparity of manifestations of class consciousness of workers in the United States, and the level of such manifestations by workers in other industrial countries. This is the abiding problem of American labor history, the problem of the "American exception" to the general pattern of development of class struggle typical of capitalist countries, and the relatively low level of class consciousness in this country. The implicit question concerned the extent to which Marx's theory of class struggle as the driving force of history was valid for the United States -- the subject that has been called "American Exceptionalism."

Students of the subject -- such as Frederick Engels, co-founder of the very theory of proletarian revolution; Frederick A. Sorge, main correspondent of Marx and Engels in the United States, and long-time active participant in the United States labor and socialist movements; Richard T. Ely, Christian Socialist and author of the first attempt at a general United States labor history, in 1886; Morris Hillquit, founder and leading figure of the Socialist Party for more than two decades; Werner Sombart, German investigator of the United States political system; John R. Commons, with his associates, compiler of a multi-volume documentary history of the labor movement in the United States; Selig

Perlman, one of the original Commons associates, and later author of *A Theory of the Labor Movement*; William Z. Foster, trade union organizer and leader of the Communist Party; Mary Beard, a labor and general historian; Charles A. Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, Allan Nevins and Henry Steel Commager have all commented on this question, this peculiarity of United States history, and they have produced and reproduced a classical consensus on this subject.

According to the consensus, the relative absence of manifestations of class conscious American labor is to be ascribed to six peculiar factors of United States historical development: 1) the existence, from the very founding of the state, of the right to vote and other democratic liberties; 2) the heterogeneity of composition of the United States working class, a conglomeration of many tongues and kindreds; 3) the "safety valve" for social discontent provided by the availability of homesteading opportunities in the West; 4) the relatively greater access to social mobility in America; 5) the relative shortage of labor, resulting in a higher level of wages as compared with that prevailing in other countries; 6) the historic precedence of the trade union over the labor party in the United States, as contrasted to continental Europe, a condition facilitating the openly anti-socialist anti-labor party policies of the dominant corrupt "aristocracy of labor" within the working class movement.¹⁷

Whatever incidental insights into our history may be provided by the various arguments advanced in this rationale for the low level of class consciousness of American workers, *they are all flawed by the failure to consider this rationale in the context of the historically omnipresent factor of white supremacy in United States history.*¹⁸ That white blindspot, which is inherent in the doctrine of American Exceptionalism, has historically frustrated the search for an explanation for the degree of class consciousness with which European-American workers have perceived, and still do perceive, *their class interests as workers.*

It would seem that David might have found American Exceptionalism's historiographical tradition of white blindness relevant to his purpose of correcting the tendency of "new labor historians" who fail to pose the problem of why "members of the white working class came to consider themselves white."¹⁹ Yet he ignores it.²⁰ A close reading of the book reveals why.

For one thing, as a disciple of Herbert Gutman, Roediger proceeds on the assumption of parallels, rather than contrasts, between the development of the consciousness of the English working class in the late 18th and the early 19th century, and United States labor history in the 1812-1860 period,²¹ even though he believes that adjustments need to be made in its application.²² That assumption contradicts the predicate theme of American Exceptionalism. Gutman's approach, furthermore, denies the premise that there is a historical role for the working class. When asked by an interviewer, "Why has there been no mass socialist movement in the United States," Gutman replied that that was a "nonhistorical question," because it rested on an assumption that there was a "proper" and an "improper" way for a workers' movements to develop.²³ Having made his decision to

align his thesis with Gutman,[24](#) why should Roediger want to get involved in the issue of the comparatively low level of class consciousness of the American working class?

Secondly, David's psycho-cultural analysis finds no relevance in objective factors such as constitute the standard rationale for the low level of class consciousness of workers in this country. Indeed, reference to them could only obscure, or even contradict, Roediger's concept of his subject, designed as it is to steer clear of a class struggle interpretation of the etiology of "white" identity. He seems to have as little use for "an historical task that workers faced" as Gutman did.[25](#)

WHAT IS MEANT BY "THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS"?

The organic definition of "working class" derives from the analysis of the operation of the general law of capital accumulation, which inexorably reproduces a propertyless segment of society whose very ability to produce becomes the commodity upon which the expansion of capital depends. In Marx's words, "The reproduction of a mass of labour power...which cannot get free from capital....[is], in fact, an essential of the reproduction of capital itself."[26](#) It has been the custom, however, with most American historians to exclude plantation bond-laborers in their references to the working class.

The proposition that the United States plantation system based on chattel bond-labor was a capitalist operation is a widely recognized principle of political economy, as noted in the writings of the otherwise quite disparate array of W. E. B. Du Bois, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Lewis C. Gray, Roger W. Shugg, and Winthrop D. Jordan. (Eric Williams and C. L. R. James view Caribbean slavery in this light, as well.) Karl Marx invariably referred to the American plantation economy as capitalist enterprise.[27](#) I, myself have expressed this view, and David Roediger writes that he has "long argued that slavery in the US was part of a capitalist system of social relations...."[28](#)

Those who would cling to the theory that the southern plantation system was something other than capitalism[29](#) should consult the views of the slaveholders themselves. Writing to a fellow slaveholder regarding the profitability of "breeding women," Thomas Jefferson advised that, "a child raised every 2. years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man...[because] [w]hat [such a] mother produces, is an addition to capital, while his [the male bond-laborer's] labors disappear in mere consumption."[30](#) Though cotton replaced tobacco as the main staple crop, still, the guiding principle for getting "greater profits" remained "to buy more slaves to make more cotton for the continued purposes of buying more slaves to make more cotton," even as "the capital cost of the slaves" rose.[31](#)

In the judgment of George Fitzhugh, perhaps the most articulate publicist of the bond-labor system, "The success of Southern farming is a striking instance of the value of the association of capital and laborers."[32](#) Finally, in 1863, the leadership corporate of the slave holders' rebellion, the "Congress of the Confederate States," declared chattel bondage to be the proper relationship of labor to capital.[33](#)

Given this understanding of slavery in Anglo-America as capitalism, and of the slaveholders as capitalists, it follows that the chattel bond-laborers were proletarians.³⁴ Accordingly, the study of class consciousness as a sense the American workers have of their own class interests, must start with recognition of that fact. But historians guided by the white blind spot have, in effect, defined the United States working class as an essentially European-American grouping. In doing so they have ignored or, at best, marginalized the propertyless African-American plantation workers, the exploitation of whose surplus value-producing labor was also the basis of capital accumulation for the employers of those workers.

Roediger's book unfortunately participates fully in the common error of the American Exceptionalists of effectively marginalizing the Black worker by conceptually excluding bond-laborers from "the American working class." Under the compulsion of the dogma of his own making -- that the "white" worker, as a self-conscious social category, could not have existed before 1800 -- Roediger even excludes from the working class European-American workers of the 180 years of the colonial period as "pre-industrial," and not "a wage-earning class."³⁵ He assigns them to the "pre-history of the white worker."³⁶

Such disregard for colonial history, serves to gloss over fundamental contradictions in David's psycho-cultural explanation of white supremacism as the creation (oh yes, "in part") of the Irish and other European-American workers in the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Roediger relies on Winthrop D. Jordan for much of his very brief references to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century continental Anglo-America; he obviously accepts Jordan's own psycho-cultural theory of the origin of "racism" as the outcome of the European colonists' need to know they were "white."³⁷ At the same time, only nineteenth century developments can serve Roediger's theory of the white supremacism being a manifestation of immigrant ex-peasants' revulsion against industrial discipline, and their comfort of not being "slaves." Here, then, is where his characterization of European-American laboring people of the colonial period as "pre-historical whites" serves to bridge over the implicit difference between his and Jordan's explanation of the "roots" of white supremacism. Still, by categorizing those workers as "whites," Roediger implicitly relies on the explanation of "the white race" as natural or hereditary phenomenon, and therefore, not a socially constructed one.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING THE INTEREST OF THE WORKING CLASS

By taking "the American working class" as their subject, labor historians necessarily presume that there is a distinct working-class interest to be investigated. In the evolution of the tactics of working class movements and organizations, at any particular juncture debates and controversies must necessarily occur over what policy decisions best serve labor's interests. The best fundamental guide, in my opinion, is that set forth by Marx and Engels to the working-class movements in Europe a century-and-half ago, and which, on the plane of American history, provides the ordinate and abscissa by which to locate the interests of the working class at any point in its history:

In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries,...point out and bring to the fore the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through,...always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.[38](#)

In 1935, W. E. B. Du Bois, having studied and set right the record of Black Reconstruction in the South, with attention to the interests of "*the laboring class, black and white, North and South*,"[39](#) drew the following somber conclusion:

The South, after the [Civil] war [said Du Bois], presented the greatest opportunity for a real national labor movement which the nation ever saw or is likely to see for many decades. Yet the [white] labor movement, with but few exceptions, never realized the situation. It never had the intelligence or knowledge, as a whole, to see in black slavery and Reconstruction, the kernel and the meaning of the labor movement in the United States.[40](#)

In my opinion, the insight thus expressed by Du Bois is indispensable for understanding and applying the general Marxist principles in assessing the interests of American labor and the state of American labor's consciousness of those interests.

Although David does not mention the subject of labor's interests explicitly, one might possibly draw positive inferences from the fact that he repeatedly speaks of the adherence of European-American workers to "white" identity as "tragic."[41](#) Furthermore, he notes the contributions to the exposure of the vice of "white" identity made by persons who, from the standpoint of Marxism, see "workers as central to progressive political change."[42](#) It is apparent that David does not intend to be a white-labor apologist; he condemns any tendency "to romanticize members of the working class, by not posing the problem of why they came to consider themselves white."[43](#) He cites James Baldwin's admonition, "As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you."[44](#) While Baldwin's observation was not directed specifically to laboring-class Americans, it retains a special validity for the analysis of the "white race" in relation to the history and the prospect of the working-class movement in this country.[45](#) Roediger associates himself with others[46](#) who earlier have argued that the European-American workers have a *class interest* in throwing off their "white" identity.

He also gives a footnote mention[47](#) to a pamphlet, *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (although he does not quote it), which in its summary says:

But their own position [that of laboring-class "whites"] vis-à-vis the rich and powerful...was not improved, but weakened by the white-skin privilege system.[48](#)

That particular pamphlet is a socio-economic study that places ultimate responsibility for white supremacy on "the rich and powerful." David chose not to quote this or any other passage of it. The reason for this reticence seems apparent. David does not say how the problem of "whiteness" is to be treated as a matter of *labor's class interest*. Furthermore, his attachment to the "new labor" ideology and method of Herbert Gutman, who expressly rejected the idea that the working class has a historical role to play, leaves unclear what Roediger's thoughts are about why casting off "white" identity should be considered a special, particular, concern of the laboring people. David has no interest in a class-struggle approach to the matter, or in blaming any "rich and powerful" ruling class. That would be to put sand in the gear-box of his argument that "working class 'whiteness' and white supremacy [are] creations, in part, of the white working class itself."[49](#)

It is here that Roediger seizes upon Du Bois's term, "psychological wage,"[50](#) as the "indispensable formulation" for the needed correction in the "new labor history" tendency.[51](#) Roediger then proceeds -- by what, in my view, is a unique misappropriation of the term, "psychological wage" -- in order to lend authority to his own answer to the problem of the "white" identity by borrowings from psycho-history, and psycho-culturalism.[52](#) But, in his desire to save the "new history" from "romanticizing the working class," Roediger unintentionally lets the classical white-labor apologists off the hook, by organically linking his argument to theses that he had found in the works of Winthrop D. Jordan and George Rawick; and what appears to me to be a misreading of the intents of Joel Kovel and Frantz Fanon.

As far as Jordan's views are concerned, what more apology could one need for "white" labor's white supremacy than his argument that Europeans come to these shores naturally endowed with white supremacy?[53](#)

Although David apparently has little acquaintance with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American happenings, he confidently praises George Rawick's, treatment of the history of white supremacy in the colonial period as presented in chapters 7 and 8 of *From Sundown to Sunup*.[54](#)

Upon reading of those chapters, however, one finds that Rawick presents nothing new, no new evidence or substantial argument, about the beginnings of the "white" identity. Just as David handed off to Rawick, Rawick hands off to Jordan, author of *White Over Black*, with its psycho-cultural theory of the origin "of American attitudes toward the Negro," which Rawick swallows whole, with a brief reference to Genovese's idea that "previous ideological conditioning made possible a racially based slavery" to help it go down.[55](#) According to that scenario, it would seem as if the reduction of African-Americans to lifetime hereditary bondage was just a matter of convenience that the ruling class got around to in their own good time. Perhaps some readers will take issue with that assessment, but in any case it is clear that Rawick, like Jordan, offers no basis for David's suppositional role of European-Americans workers as creators of "white" identity.

David names Joel Kovel's *White Racism* as one of the sources of the "method and evidence" for *Wages of Whiteness*. But if, as Kovel *at one time* said, it were simply a

matter of the Western id working its purpose out by aggression against, or aversion to, its dark "other," then might not that serve as ammunition for the white-labor apologists, who simply take the "white" identity as a given?

It is unfortunate that Roediger did not take notice of the second edition of Kovel's book, published in 1984, seven years before the publication of *Wages of Whiteness*. Kovel begins with a 48-page reconsideration of his first edition. That edition, he says, was the product of his salad days, when he was "immersed in training at a medically orthodox Freudian psychoanalytic institute... [so that] I had absorbed...entirely too much of what is called Ego Psychology, and I had chained my discourse up in it." (p. xxxix). But his revised view is that

One no longer blames racism on...lower middle class or working class whites -- but assigns responsibility according to real power over the racist society. I do not mean to exonerate the hate-filled, rock-throwing racial bigot....But....[o]f far greater significance is the man in control. (xxxiv)

Kovel concludes his introduction to that second edition by saying, "if racism can change" [as from slave patrol to Jim Crow, he might say -- TWA] "it can be made to go away....The cure for white racism? It is quite simple, really, only get rid of imperialism."(pp. xlix, xl.)

One may agree or disagree with these latter-day remarks of Kovel, in matter or in manner, but the view they express cannot possibly be made to support Roediger's argument, which avoids invidious references to the ruling class, while ascribing white supremacy to the "creative" powers of the European-American workers.

Roediger cites only one of Frantz Fanon's books, *Black Skin, White Masks*,⁵⁶ and cites that book only once. He uses it, not to establish a substantial relation with Fanon's work, but merely in the effort to validate his own argument for psychic origins of white supremacy among "white" workers in the ante-bellum North.

References to the ante-bellum political and economic environment may help explain Irish-American Catholics' "embrace of whiteness," David writes, but analysis along that line, he believes, is "altogether too utilitarian." That is as far as Roediger goes in the direction of a hinting at a possible ruling class involvement in the creation of the "whiteness" syndrome among European-Americans of the laboring classes. Even so, he borrows a notorious Jordanism to call this option "an unthinking decision."⁵⁷ Such socio-economic factors, he argues, cannot explain why "Irish-American Catholics would, for example, mutilate the corpses of free Blacks they lynched in the 1863 Draft Riot in New York City." That would be explained by -- and here David uses two widely separated phrases from Fanon -- "'the prelogical thought of the phobic'....[that led the Irish-American Catholic into] [p]rojecting his own desires onto the Negro'...."⁵⁸

I do not question the literal accuracy of the citation, but I do question David's use of it. Acts of extreme sadism occur during wars, "religious" frenzies, and in "racial" pogroms,

such as were committed in the 1863 Draft Riot. Fanon's own case-notes provide confirmation of such acts in colonial Algeria, including those practiced by French colonial police.⁵⁹ But he does not explain these acts as an alternative to struggle against class oppression. That is what David does, and does so in the context of his rejection of what he thinks of as "overly simple economic explanations" of white identity.⁶⁰

Fanon's central concern was to help Africans overcome self-abasement resulting from experience with colonial oppressors. As he says, "We shall try to discover the various postures adopted by the Negro in the face of white civilization."⁶¹ The self-hatred and the mental disorders acted out in individual violence by the Algerians are "not the consequence of the organization of his nervous system or of characterial originality, but the direct product of the colonial situation....[H]e [the Algerian] ought to pay attention to all untruths implanted in his being by oppression."⁶² White "racism," as Fanon had observed it, is regarded as being simply a projection of Europeans' desire to exploit African people more effectively.

Fanon was able to base his psychoanalysis on direct observation and interviews, and on his personal involvement in the struggle against French chauvinism. And, unlike Roediger, he proceeded from Marxist economic determinist premises:

The analysis [of the "white masks" problem] that I am undertaking is psychological. In spite of this it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: -- primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization -- or better, the epidermalization -- of this inferiority.⁶³

David, on the other hand, depends upon inferences regarding the ante-bellum "white" workers drawn from his Freudian studies, perhaps from his own biography, and from his individual interpretation of Du Bois's phrase, "psychological wage."⁶⁴ His disparagement of economic determinism, and his thesis of the "creation" of white supremacism by "the American working class," contrast sharply with the economic premise, and the theory of internalization of Fanon's investigations.

I am just one of the many Americans who admire Fanon's courageous determination to put his professional capacities at the service of Algerian national liberation, and the liberation struggles of the people of Africa, in general, from colonialism and its neo-colonialist residue. He was rigorous and energetic in exposing and denouncing any attempt to apologize for "white" colonial oppression. It would not have strengthened his case to have suggested that racial oppression was an id-driven "creation" -- and he did not. Perhaps David, by his resort to the language of psychoanalysis, does score some points against the tendency which he finds in the works of some "new labor historians" to "romanticize" the "white" worker. But, instead of challenging the white-labor apologists' denial of the class-struggle meaning of "white" identity, he only gives them more wiggle room.

Thus, of these four sources of "methods and evidence," two -- Kovel and Fanon -- fail him because of their class-struggle orientation." The two others -- Jordan and Rawick -- present arguments that run counter to David's notion that the nineteenth-century European-Americans created "white identity." David appears unmindful of the shakiness of the support afforded him by these sources. He proceeds with full confidence in his theory that the "white workers" did not emerge until the nineteenth century, at which time they created "white racism."

England and U.S. -- Same Anxieties, Different Responses

According to Roediger, European-American workers "created" their "white" identity as a response to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline. [65](#) Artisans' "revolutionary pride" and fear of being reduced to a dependent status as wage-laborers for capitalists was expressed in "white republican equalitarianism." Unskilled immigrants' nostalgia for the halcyon life in their homelands, found solace in "white identity," which made them "free citizens," shielded from being compared to "slaves." A sort of Freudian, rather than Du Boisian, "psychological wage" was provided for the European-American laboring people, according to David, in the form of release from sexual repression by projecting their sexual fantasies onto African-Americans, most commonly in blackface minstrel shows, but also on occasion in sadistic behavior toward Black people. Even in his somewhat self-critical "Afterword" in the second edition of *Wages*, David still "decidedly argue[s] that white identity has its roots both in domination and in a desire to avoid confronting one's own miseries." [66](#)

E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* takes the English artisans and the working classes generally through that same metamorphosis in the period 1790-1830, and describes and analyzes various responses of English working people to the social degradation and factory discipline visited upon them by the vaunted Industrial Revolution. One form of response was found in Wesleyan Methodism, which tended to sublimate hatred for the exploiters into sin-inspections and guilt. Another response sought solace in chiliastic anticipation. The nearest English analog to the European-American "white" identity phenomenon was in the line drawn between "sinners" and the "saved," with "backsliders" subject to exclusion from Christian fellowship. [67](#) But, unlike "white" identity in the United States, and unlike "Protestant" identity in Ireland, being "saved" did not confer social status in England. Another line of response, expressing a class-struggle orientation included the machine-wrecker Luddites, trade union organization, [68](#) and the struggle for political reform, which was to culminate in the Charter movement of the 1830s that expressed the "working people's consciousness of their interests as a class." [69](#)

In 1872, the First International rejected a proposal to deny the request of Irish workers in England to form their own Irish sections of the International. The Council based its stand on the recognition that the interests of the English working class required support of the Irish struggle for independence (conceived of at that time as "Home Rule"). In the course of the discussion of the proposal, its opponents, including Frederick Engels, referred to "the belief, only too common among the English working men, that they were superior beings compared to the Irish, as much an aristocracy as the mean Whites of the

Slave States considered themselves to be with regard to the Negro." The Council did not attempt to account for this chauvinistic attitude of the English workers as a "natural" attribute or as the outcome of psychic drives; rather they explained it as "one of the most common means by which class rule was upheld in England."[70](#)

Why was it that -- whatever the degree of anti-Irish prejudice among English workers - Irish laboring folk fleeing racial oppression were welcomed in England where industry was in need of them, whereas in the United States the industrial bourgeoisie was barred by law from meeting its growing labor needs by employing African-Americans fleeing from racial oppression in the South? The answer is that in the United States the government was constituted on the strict condition of giving full faith and credit recognition to slavery, and the sixty per cent electoral bonus to slaveholding states. It was as a consequence of this fact that the country was dominated by the Southern slaveholders from the American Revolution until the Civil War, and white supremacy was established as a sort of American super-religion, with appropriate penalties for "backsliders."[71](#) Under the circumstances, "white" identity was made to appear to be an unrefusable offer. But it would prove to be as unhelpful to the class interests of European-American workers as "salvation," or reliance on an imminent Judgment Day was to the class interests of the workers in England.

To invoke what are perfectly understandable and appropriate proletarian fears of and grievances of these workers, or to resort to plausible Freudian inferences regarding the projection of repressed sexual fantasies, to account for the "white identity" phenomenon, seems more of a justification than an analysis of it. Even if one were to accept David's interpretation, it would still leave unanswered the question: *Why should these workers have responded to their exploitation and social degradation in the particular form of 'white' identification, and not by following the advice of Daniel O'Connell and Frederick Douglass to make solidarity with the African Americans, bond and free, in the struggle for an end to rule by the slaveholders and against the juggernaut of capital pressing in on their lives throughout the country.*

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AND HISTORY'S UNINTENDED RESULTS

David associates himself with activist scholars whose "historical writing on whiteness" show them to be "deeply indebted to Marxism and committed to seeing workers as central to progressive political change."[72](#) As such, he is as familiar as I am with the Marxist proposition that, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class."[73](#) If that concept does not apply to the historical prevalence of white supremacy in continental Anglo-America, in both its colonial and its regenerate United States form, it has no sociological validity at all. Yet, Roediger's thesis seems predicated on the denial of that time-honored axiom of social science.

In the name of "neo-Marxism," David disparages the basic "ruling-class-ruling-ideas" tenet of Marxism, and *misrepresents* it as a theory that "racism simply trickles down the class structure" from "the commanding heights at which is created," into the gaping

mouths of witless European-American proletarian dupes.⁷⁴ That notion is nothing other than a straw man designed for easy dismissal between ironic quotations marks. It suits a certain academic fashion whereby its practitioners, including "neo-Marxists," may excuse themselves from serious discussion of substantial issues regarding Marxist doctrine.

For example, Roediger dismisses the perspective of Oliver Cromwell Cox, author of *Caste, Class, and Race*, as an obsolete theory of a "class-based revolution as the solution to racism," a "rosy view...of the possibility of an unambiguous revolutionary solution to racism [that is] largely gone."⁷⁵ The basis of Roediger's criticism of Cox is that he does not give due attention to the role of "the [white] workers" in "creating" racial oppression. If one conceived of "class," as in the "white working class" of Roediger's title, then, of course, that would be a fallacy, one that has been brought out before, as David himself acknowledges.⁷⁶ But if one conceives of "the revolution" as an instrumentality of a working class composed of Black and other direct victims of white-supremacism, and sufficient numbers of European-Americans who have repudiated the white-skin privilege system, that would indeed be an unambiguous revolution, a fundamental transformation of our country into a "people first" society.

Roediger's comment on Cox occurs in the context of his general rejection of "traditional Marxists," to whom Roediger imputes a "trickle-down" theory of political ideology based on an "overly simple economic explanations." Such a characterization is an absurdity; if made without an offer of substantial evidence it is aggravated assault. The original "traditionals" were Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, evolved Hegelians. Putting Hegel's dialectics to the service of their materialist outlook, they incorporated in their philosophy the concepts of the unity and interpenetration of opposites, and that every real thing is a complex of processes. To the problem of free will, they posed the concept that freedom is the recognition of necessity.⁷⁷ In one elaboration of Marxist philosophic principles, Engels said that although Ludwig Feuerbach, their forerunner as a philosophical materialist, put the human being at the start of his outlook, he failed to relate the human being to the context in which this human being lived.⁷⁸

Men make their own history [wrote Engels], whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end...it is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions and of their manifold effects upon the outer world that constitutes history. The will is determined by passion or deliberation...[W]e have seen that the many individual wills active in history for the most part produce results quite other than those intended...[But] the further question arises: What driving forces in turn stand behind these motives? What are the historical causes which transform themselves into the motives in the brains of the actors...? For the old materialism....nothing very edifying is to be found from the study of history....because it [the old materialism] takes the ideal driving forces that operate there [in history] as ultimate causes, instead of investigating what is behind them, what are the driving forces of these driving forces."⁷⁹

This comment on Feuerbach, seems relevant to our repeated question: Why would European-American workers respond to their exploitation and social degradation in *the particular form of "white" identification*, rather than in "non-racial" ways? If one is content with observing the world, like an anthropologist or archaeologist, that might not present a problem; but for one bent on changing the world, it cannot be avoided.

Roediger's avoidance of that question shows not only a failure to apply dialectical logic, but, more pointedly, it is a manifestation of his acknowledged white blind-spot. Here indeed we have a case of "wills that produce[d] results quite other than those intended." The "white" identity did not preserve the artisans nor save others from reduction to life as merely another kind of Whitneyian replaceable parts in capitalist enterprises. Just the opposite, they lost the ten-hour day struggle, and efforts at establishing an independent labor party dissolved in defeat. Worse for them, by far -- because of the inescapable national necessity to abolish slavery -- the country was drawn into a war that not only brought death and severe injury for hundreds of thousands of laboring-class European-Americans, but also sharply eroded the buying power of their already insufficient wages.[80](#)

DIFFERENT STROKES . . . ?

What were the driving forces behind their *self-defeating motives*? David, without the slightest mention of such forces, simply ascribes the passionate adherence to the "white race," to "creative" propensities of the European-American workers themselves, stoked by a collective id-hatched requirement for an "other" on whom to project their own guilt and repression and aversion of guilt rooted in infantile toilet training. What but the white blindspot could have permitted David to reconcile such a schematic formulation with his own belief in "race as a social construct" if he had investigated the responses of hundreds of thousands of African Americans who in this same period were also being inducted into capitalist industry.

According to the only general study of industrial bond-servitude in this country, "southern industry's most interesting aspect was its wide and intensive use of slave labor. In the 1850's ...between 160,000 and 200,000 bondmen...worked in industry."[81](#) Whether in agriculture, or in mines, factories, timbering, or other work sites, the bond-laborers' main grievance was, of course, bond-servitude itself. Among the industrial bond-laborers, the most common complaint was the necessity to repress their "natural desire to avoid the drudgery of industrial routines." These workers had practically no way of recording or publicizing their resentments of their forced transition to industrial employment; but Starobin found journals and letters of employers and owners that reflect the workers' feelings and attitudes. Their most trying adjustment to industrial life was to the enforced separation from their plantation-bound wives and families.[82](#) Roediger is perceptive in comparing the longings felt by Irish immigrants and of free African-Americans in the North for family and friends left behind, after having been "wrenched from [their] homeland[s]."[83](#) But, for almost all the male industrial bond-laborers, this was their

homeland, yet they could not go home; to do so without the employers' permission, meant that when they returned they would be subject to severe corporal punishment.

While the number of African-American non-agricultural workers was much greater in the South, free African Americans faced their own special problems of adjustment to the transition to hired-labor status. For free African Americans says Charles H. Wesley, in his classic, closely documented, labor study, "the transition from slavery to freedom, for individuals as well as the group, was not completed without creating difficulties....The adjustment to the new environment in the North often occasioned hardships."[84](#) Leon F. Litwak's thoroughly researched and well-documented work found that, "Although they had been recently employed under slavery in a variety of skilled as well as unskilled occupations, emancipated Negroes found their economic opportunities limited to jobs as servants, seamen, or common laborers." A French visitor to America in 1788 found that "The prejudices of Whites which lay obstacles in their way" caused free African Americans to be denied advancement in employment and access to education.[85](#)

The African-American workers, no less than European-American workers, responded to the frustrations that faced them as they were inducted into capitalist industrial life. Robert Starobin has concentrated most concisely on the range of responses of industrial bond-laborers in his chapter titled, "Patterns of Resistance and Repression."[86](#) "The most subtle forms of slave protest were negligence, slowdown, feigned sickness, outright refusal to work, and pilferage.... Servile protests sometimes assumed more extreme forms, ranging from arson to escapes and from assaults to rebellions." Revulsion against the repetitive drudgery of industrial work is suggested by the fact that those who ran away seemed to absent themselves most frequently at those times when "industrial operations peaked and production pressures mounted."[87](#)

The free African-Americans in general responded to the hardships of wage-labor employment and unemployment by striving to improve their knowledge and skills; and by rallying to combat the white supremacist barriers that were presented to their employment, and mobility. These intertwining concerns as expressed in conventions, manifestoes, petitions, and newspapers continually from 1787 to the end of the ante-bellum period. James Forten, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, published his protest in Philadelphia in 1813: "Those patriotic citizens, who, after resting from the toils of an arduous war, which achieved our independence...[are faced with the fact that] it appears as if the committee [of the Pennsylvania State Legislature]...do not consider us men....Has the God who made the white man and the black left any record declaring us a different species?....The same power which protects the white man, should protect the black."[88](#) The delegates to the Second Annual National Negro Convention in Philadelphia in 1832, resolved "strictly to watch those causes that operate against our interests and privileges; and to guard against whatever measures will either lower us in the scale of being, or perpetuate our degradation in the eyes of the world....[89](#) "We must have Colleges and high Schools on the Manual Labor system, where our youth may be instructed in all the arts of civilized life."[90](#) The State Convention of Ohio Negroes in 1849, declared its intention, "To sternly resist, by all means which the God of Nations has placed in our power, every form of oppression or proscriptions attempted to be imposed

on us, in consequence of our condition or color. To give our earnest attention to the universal education of our people."[91](#)

Such well known and long established facts make it clear that induction into industrial discipline had its galling frustrations for African-American workers, just as it did for European-Americans. Yet one set of workers sought the abolition of chattel bondage and improved educational and apprenticeship opportunities. The other opposed abolition, supported the Fugitive Slave Law, and tried to bar Black workers from the trades. Why the difference? As for Freudian insights, had not African-Americans their ids? Were they not also veterans of the rigors of toilet training, and of feelings of repression and aggression stemming therefrom? Did they not have sexual fantasies that craved release?

Obviously, the catalog of personality characteristics traceable to such universal psychological factors does not explain why some behavioral patterns took the peculiar white supremacist form. It would seem logical, therefore, to look at the "forces behind the forces," at the will of capital shaped by the need for ever greater accumulation of capital; the will that needs and has the power to destroy the artisan and to impose immiseration on the working class, and whose need to enforce and maintain its power depends on white supremacy.

In conclusion, therefore, in spite of my agreement with Roediger regarding the "white race" as a social construct, and on the destruction[92](#) wrought by the "white" identity on the working class cause, I must challenge his psycho-cultural answer to the fundamental subject addressed in his study, namely, the *etiology* -- the when, why, and how -- of the emergence of the "*white*" identity as a connotation of social status of European-Americans of the laboring classes.

No Demographic By-pass Will Evade the Centrality of Struggle Against White Supremacism

To return at last to the subject of the despair expressed by reviewers because of the impression that Roediger had held out no hope for coping with white supremacy among European-American workers, and for the prospects for a historically transforming role for the United States working class. In response, David avowed an optimism for the future of the cause of labor, not in expectation of the repudiation of the white-skin privileges by European-American workers, but on demographic grounds of the prospective increasingly not-white and not-male composition of the United States working class, and specifically because such a transformation, he believes, will serve to remind white males that they are not the center of the labor movement, but only a segment of it.[93](#)

For my part, any way for casting off that shirt of Nessus, the incubus of "white identity," would suit me, but Roediger's rather mechanistic perspective for producing a class-conscious proletariat, is problematic, to say the least. In a more recent article, David, himself, warns that, "demographic shifts do not *automatically* change anything."[94](#) That caution seems to me to be most appropriate, since the "demographic

solution" requires the favorable constellation of three preconditions: 1) a predominant willingness of European-American females to repudiate white-skin privileges;⁹⁵ 2) the readiness of not-white males to support the general struggle against male supremacism 3) a disregard for the mass of unconvinced white male workers, who enjoy general support from the ruling class in regard to "racial" privileges and patriarchal principles. It is a perspective that would require not only an absolutely unprecedented reduction of the sex ratio among European-Americans, but one in which "white" males are presumed to play a passive role. You don't have to have the active adherence of *all* the European-American males to dismantle the "white race," but you cannot rely on their being passive.

And, then, there is the little matter of the ruling class. They know as much as anybody about demographic changes and the possible bearing that those numbers have on social control.⁹⁶ They can be expected to use all their power and influence, developed over centuries, to try to take measures to discourage proletarian class consciousness by, once again, reinforcing white supremacism through the divisiveness of "ethnic politics," and by myriad "wedge" issues -- abortion, religion in the public schools, pistol-carrying, etc. -- hammered at constantly by their auxiliaries. However promising the phenotypic changes in the American population may appear, we cannot rely on demographics or any other naturally occurring factor, to fundamentally alter power relationships in this country. Whatever may be the remedy for feelings of despair noted by Dana Frank and the others, the requisite focus of effort needed for moving forward requires a strategy. That would be the proper way to recognize the value of David's warning against "automatic" solutions to racial and sexual oppression, as not only evils in themselves, but as barriers to class consciousness of the American working class. What that strategy is to be is a matter for discussion in a hundred venues.

Drawing Lessons

As gratifying as the widening acceptance of the historico-relativist "social construct" theory may be, it is well to remember the fate of the first bold conceptual stroke designed to cut the Gordian knot of biology and "race" as a social formation. In the early 1930s the Communist party propounded the thesis of the Negro nation in the Black Belt. The "Negro question," as it was termed, was given a rational historical basis for challenging the theory and practice of white supremacy. An absolutely essential key corollary of this theory was the assignment of particular responsibility to "white" radicals to combat white supremacist practices within the working class.⁹⁷

The Communists subsequently gained a wide degree of acceptance and indeed cooptation within the New Deal coalition, Roosevelt's famous "troika," -- big city political machines, the labor movement, and the avowedly white-supremacists in the "Solid South." The price paid, unfortunately, was the abandonment of the centrality of the struggle against white supremacism within the working class. Under this circumstance, the Black Belt nation theory was made to serve the very opposite of its originally declared intent, by making Black liberation contingent primarily upon the eventual victory of the racially privileged working-class "whites."⁹⁸

However different the race-as-a-social-construct approach may be from the Black Belt Nation theory, the same basic gravitational field of white supremacy operates today as it did in the 1930s. Therefore, it is important for us to keep that history in mind, as we survey the current political and ideological scene, so that we may be alert to points at which that pervasive influence might start to reduce the pursuit of the abolition of the "white" identity to merely a study of "cultural differences," in which "racial identity" is regarded as a component of group heritage.

The thesis of "race-as-a-social-construct," as it now stands, despite its value in objectifying "whiteness," is an insufficient basis for refutation of white-supremacist apologetics, and for advancing "the abolition of whiteness." The logic must be tightened and the focus sharpened. Just as it is unhelpful, to say the least, to euphemize racial slavery in continental Anglo-America as "the Peculiar Institution," instead of identifying the "white race" itself as the truly peculiar institution governing the life of this country after Emancipation as it did in slavery times; just as it is not "race," in general, that must be understood, but the "white race," in particular; so the "white race" must be understood, not simply as a social construct (rather than a genetic phenomenon), but as a ruling-class social control formation.

It is not enough to reject the "natural racism" idea; it must be confronted by a self-standing completely opposite theory in full array, and driven from the field. For Marxists, of whatever vintage they may be, who espouse the "race-as-a-social-construct" thesis, this requires taking up -- behaviorally and forensically -- four basic challenges. First, to show that white supremacy is not an inherited attribute of the European-American personality. Secondly, to demonstrate that white-supremacy has not served the interests of the laboring-class European-Americans. Third: to account for the prevalence of white-supremacy within the ranks of laboring-class European-Americans. Fourth, by the light of history, to consider ways whereby European-American laboring people may cast off the stifling incubus of "white" identity.

Notes

1 David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*, because of its almost universal acceptance for use in colleges and universities, has served as the single most effective instrument in the socially necessary consciousness-raising function of objectifying "whiteness," and in popularizing the "race-as-a-social-construct" thesis. As one who has been the beneficiary of kind supportive comments from him for my own efforts in this field of historical investigation, I undertake this critical essay with no other purpose than furthering our common aim of the disestablishment of white identity and the overthrow of white supremacy in general.

[2](#) Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Second Edition (New York, 1999), p. 5. Hereafter this work will be noted as *Wages*, 2nd edition.

[3](#) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[4](#) *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[5](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11. Of them, Roediger lists Gwendolyn Mink, Robin D. G. Kelley, Eric Arnesen, Dan Letwin, Joseph Trotter, Dolores Janiewski, Roger Horowitz, Michael Honey, Daniel Rosenberg, and Alexander Saxton.

[6](#) The revised (1999) edition provides a list of "Selected Critical Writings" of the first (1991) edition.

[7](#) Dana Frank, "A Class About Race," *Socialist Review*, 24 (1995), 243-250.

[8](#) "History, Race and the Steel Industry." *Radical Historians Newsletter*, 76 (June 1997), 1, 13-16).

[9](#) *Wages*, revised edition, "Afterword," p. 187.

[10](#) Those by Stowe, Wolton.

[11](#) Lawrence Glickman, "I'm All White, Jack," *The Nation*, 17 February 1992. Noel Ignatiev, *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), a combined commentary on Roediger's, *Wages of Whiteness* and Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (New York, 1990). Iver Bernstein, in *The Journal of American History*, December 1992. Peter A. Chvany, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Whiteness," *The Minnesota Review*, "The White Issue," guest editor, Mike Hill, 1996.

[12](#) George Fishman, "Review of the Month," in *Political Affairs*, June 1994. Fishman rejects Roediger, in whole and in part. While he berates Roediger for neglecting the class struggle context, Fishman, because of a severe case of white-blindness, misses altogether the crucial importance of the phenomenon of "white" identity made by Roediger.

[13](#) Ignatiev ended his generally kindly comments on *Wages of Whiteness* with what I believe to be three very important reservations: relating to the emphasis on "psychological wage"; the argument that "white" workers profit from white supremacy; and, particularly, the fatal neglect of the seventeenth century and, especially, of Bacon's Rebellion.

[14](#) *Wages*, revised edition, "Afterword," p. 187.

[15](#) It is with enthusiasm that I refer the reader to the writings of Gregory Meyerson, "Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Labor Competition" (*Cultural Logic*, vol. 1, no. 1 [Spring,

1998] and "Rethinking Black Marxism," a review of Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983), in *Cultural Logic*, vol. 3, no. 1&2 [1999]. Working independently of each other, Meyerson and I have developed an essentially identical criticism of the notion of substituting a cultural rationale in place of a historical materialist analysis of white supremacism. The force of our argument is all the stronger, it seems to me, precisely because it is derived from two distinct sets of evidentiary materials.

[16](#) This is the definition of class consciousness as conceived by E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; New York, 1966), p. 711.

[17](#) "It is not to be denied," wrote Engels to Sorge, December 2, 1893, "that American conditions involve very great and peculiar difficulties for a steady development of a workers' party." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Letters to Americans, 1848-1895* (New York, 1953), p. 258. See also, William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (New York, 1952), pp. 542-44; and idem., *The Crisis in the Socialist Party* (New York, 1936), pp. 4-6.

[18](#) Recognition is due, however, to insights, limited though they are, of two of these scholars.

Sombart, who was the first to attempt a comprehensive cataloging of the points of this rationale, made a most perceptive finding, although he applied it only to the operation of the political two-party system. "The Negro question," he said, "has directly removed any class character from each of the two parties and has caused the concentration of strength to be much more according to geographical areas than class membership." (Werner Sombart, *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* [Breslau, 1906]; translated by Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands; edited and introduced by C. T. Husbands, with a Foreword by Michael Harrington, [New York, 1976], p. 49.)

In his discussion of the "social mobility" factor, Selig Perlman, incidentally confirms the definition of racial oppression. After noting that "The Negroes in industry are, of course, a hereditary wage earning group," Perlman goes on to say that "[T]he bright son of a ["white" -- TWA] mechanic and factory hand, whether of native or immigrant parentage need not despair... if his ambition and his luck go hand in hand, of attaining to some of the...numerous kinds of small businesses, or, finally, of the many minor supervisory positions in the large manufacturing establishments...." But Perlman does not attempt to consider how the exclusion of the Black worker from such privileges, may have contributed to "the lack of a class consciousness" of "the great mass of wage earners...[who] will die wage earners." Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* [New York, 1928; Augustus M. Kelley reprt., 1966], pp. 165-68. The quotation is found at p. 165).

[19](#) *Wages*, p. 11.

[20](#) "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the New Immigrant Working Class," a 40-page article by James R. Barrett and David Roediger, was published in a collection titled, *American Exceptionalism? US Working-Class Formation in an International Context*, eds. Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris (New York, 1997). Their term "inbetween peoples" refers to "new immigrant workers in the United States." The article is concerned with the discrimination against immigrants from Europe, in the period 1895-1925 and with "the development of racial awareness and attitudes, and an increasingly racialised worldview among new immigrants themselves." The article says that these immigrants temporarily occupied a social status "in between" the "whites" and the African Americans and other not-whites. That thesis seems to me to draw a herring across the trail of the search for the historical roots of "white" identity and proletarian class consciousness in the United States. In any case, the subject of their article lies outside the scope of David's *Wages of Whiteness* to which my present commentary is directed. But it is to be noted that their article represents a wide departure from the psycho-history approach taken in *Wages*.

[21](#) See *Wages*, pp. 9, 95, 96. As is well known Gutman, himself, until his untimely death in 1984, sought to "follow in the footsteps" of Thompson by organizing an American Social History Project dedicated to accomplishing in the study of American labor history what he felt Thompson had produced with his *The Making of the English Working Class*. After reading Thompson's book, Gutman resolved that "he would write of how American workers had made their own history." (Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, Ira Berlin, ed. [New York, 1987], p. 20.)

[22](#) See David Roediger and Philip S. Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* (London, 1989), p. 1, n.1. The authors refer to E. P. Thompson's article, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism" (*Past and Present*, 38:56-97), as "a masterful treatment of changing perceptions of time," though, they add, "it must be modified by analysis of American conditions."

[23](#) Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York, 1987), p. 343. Berlin relates that when Gutman's students "wanted to know why there was no American socialism...why American workers failed in their historically preordained task, he roared, 'I don't think that way historically...I don't know what it means to talk about "an historical task that workers faced.''" (Ibid., p. 34.)

[24](#) Two years before the publication of *Wages*, David wrote an article answering the rhetorical question, "What Was So Great About Herbert Gutman?" While acknowledging what he saw as some Gutman weaknesses, Roediger judged him to have been "a great historian...a product of the Old Left...[who] moved toward a culturally-based history." (*Labour/Travail*, 23 [Spring 1989], pp. 255-261.) Roediger claims that "virtually all recent labor historians have been his [Gutman's] students." (*Wages*, p. 95.)

[25](#) Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture*, Ira Berlin, ed., p. 34.

[26](#) Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume One (New York, Modern Library, n. d.; originally published by Charles H. Kerr, 1906.) The citation is from the Modern Library edition, p. 673; For readers of other editions it will be found near the end of paragraph 4 of Chapter XXV. Cf. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 8-11.

[27](#) "The production of surplus-value is the absolute law of this [capitalist -- TWA] mode of production." "The overworking of the Negro [bond-laborer -- TWA]....was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products [as in ancient classical slavery -- TWA]. It was now a question of the production of surplus-value itself." (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Modern Library Edition, 1:260, 678.)

Referring to circumstances where the rent and the profit both go to the owner-employer, Marx observes that, "Where capitalist conceptions predominate, as they did upon the American plantations, this entire surplus-value is regarded as profit." (*Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III, The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole* [Chicago, 1909], p. 934.) Writing before the Civil War, on the nature of differential rent, Marx noted in passing that, while free wage-labor is the normal basis of capitalist production, still "the capitalist mode of production exists" in the Anglo-American plantation colonies based on "the slavery of Negroes." (Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value: Volume IV of Capital*, 3 vols. [Moscow, 1968]; 2:303.)

[28](#) *Wages*, 2nd edition, p. 188.

[29](#) See, for example, Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1961), pp. 14, 19, 34. The plantation capitalism thesis, says Genovese, "does violence to ante-bellum Southern history." Slavery in the South, he argues, was in the capitalist world context, but the South was an exploited colony, not a capitalist country or region.

[30](#) Jefferson letters to William Yancey, January 17, 1819, and to W. Eppes, June 30, 1820; cited by William Cohen "Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery," *Journal of American History*, 16:58 (1969).

[31](#) Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929. Republished with an introduction by C. Vann Woodward [Boston, 1963]), p. 186.

[32](#) George Fitzhugh, *Sociology of the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (1854. Reprinted in Harvey Wish, ed., *Ante-Bellum Writings of George Fitzhugh and Hinton Rowan Helper* [New York, 1960], p. 58.)

[33](#) *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 1 (Richmond, 1876), "Address of Congress to the People of the Confederate States" (adopted in December 1863), Joint Resolution in relation to the war (pp. 23-38). "...[T]hese States withdrew from the former Union and formed a new confederate alliance as an independent Government, based on the proper relations of labor and capital. (p. 24)

[34](#) The difference between the two categories of proletarians, Marx noted, was simply that the African-American bond-laborer was "sold without his concurrence," while the European-American wage-worker could "sell himself." ("To Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America," *Documents of the First International*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1964), 1:53. This document was approved at the meeting of the Council of the International Workingmen's Association on 29 November 1864. It was published in the London *Beehive* newspaper, January 7, 1865, and is reprinted in James S. Allen, *Reconstruction, Battle for Democracy, 1865-1876* (New York, 1937), pp. 246-48.

[35](#) *Wages*, p. 43. David acknowledges his debt to Ira Berlin and Herbert Gutman for this formulation. He is presumably referring to "the many gradations of unfreedom among whites," in indentured service. (p. 25) Aside from neglecting to substantiate his assertion, David arbitrarily excludes limited-term bond-laborers from "the working class."

[36](#) Roediger titled Chapter 2 of *Wages*, "The Prehistory of the White Worker." See esp., pp. 19-27.

[37](#) Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black*, p. xiv. "Winthrop Jordan's full and eloquent *White Over Black*," says Roediger, "traces the roots of American racism before Jamestown..." (Roediger, *Wages*, p. 23.) Jamestown, the first English settlement in the Americas, was founded in 1607.

[38](#) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. Section II.

Samuel L. Gompers, who was president of the American Federation of Labor throughout most of its existence until his death in 1924, began his labor career as a Marxist, a reader of *The Communist Manifesto*. However, he forsook that doctrine, and developed another view of the interests of the workers. He adopted two guiding principles for making policy decisions, which it is interesting to compare with points one and two of the guide lines recommended by Marx and Engels. In point one Marx and Engels speak of "the interests of the entire proletariat"; Gompers took as his motto a phrase that he had been taught by an early mentor: "Study your union card, Sam, and if the idea doesn't square with that, it ain't true." In point two, Marx and Engels say, keep in mind the historical line of march through its various stages; Gompers' perennial immediate aim was simply "More"; as to long range objects of the working class movement, that was something that, Gompers said, "I am perfectly willing that the future shall determine and work out." (Louis S. Reed, *The Labor Philosophy of Samuel Gompers* [New York, 1930], pp. 12, 13. Bernard Mandel, *Samuel Gompers: A Biography* [Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1963], 16, 18.)

[39](#) "The only power to curtail the rising empire of finance in the United States was industrial democracy -- votes and intelligence in the hands of the laboring class, black and white, North and South." (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 377.)

[40](#) *Ibid*, p. 353.

[41](#) *Wages*, pp, 13, 175, 181.

[42](#) *Wages*, second edition, p. 188.

[43](#) *Wages*, pp. 10-11.

[44](#) *Ibid.*, p. 6. Roediger cites a film *The Price of a Ticket*, made in the mid-1980's about Baldwin's life, as the source of this famous remark. It has appeared elsewhere, e. g., "On Being White...and Other Lies," *Essence*, 14, no 12 (April 1984), 90-92.

[45](#) Roediger could have also cited two specifically proletarian-oriented works that analyzed the white identity and its fatal implications for the interests of the working class, and for the broad course of American history.

"[W]hat we are talking about is NOT the "Negro question"...but (as some Negro publicists have previously put it) the 'white question,' the white question of questions -- the centrality of the problem of white supremacy and the white-skin privilege which have historically frustrated the struggle for democracy, progress and socialism in the U.S." (Letter from Ted Allen to Noel Ignatin [Ignatiev] in *White Blind Spot* [New York and Atlanta], October, 1969);

and,

"A radical is one who understands...that the white-skin privilege is the Achilles Heel of the American working class." (Ted Allen, *Can White Radicals be Radicalized?* [New York and Atlanta, October 1969], p. 18).

[46](#) Alexander Saxton, Noel Ignatiev, John Garvey, and myself, for instance. And, of course, Du Bois, who first made the same point without the same phrasing.

[47](#) *Wages*, p. 39, n. 46.

[48](#) Theodore William Allen, *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (Hoboken, 1975), p. 12.

The pamphlet referred to was an expanded version with full footnotes of an article, "...They Would Have Destroyed Me': Slavery and the Origins of Racism," *Radical America*, 9 (May-June 1975), pp. 40-63. The subtitle of the pamphlet anticipated the titles given to the two-volume work, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, and *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London and New York, 1994 and 1997, respectively).

[49](#) *Wages*, p. 9. For myself, at least, there is little comfort in the extenuating phrase, "in part," especially since the book never suggests who might have created the other part.

[50](#) DuBois specifies how, despite their low wages, "white" workers were given "deference" in public functions and facilities, in the employment as police, and voting rights, with an accompanying leverage on the administration of local schools and courts. (W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* [New York, 1935], pp. 700-701. Roediger cites the paragraph extensively. (*Wages of Whiteness*, p. 12.)

[51](#) We may note in passing that nowhere does Roediger undertake to explain any way in which "public and psychological wage" is not subsumed in the term "white-skin privilege," which two pages before he chose to mention in a pejorative context.

[52](#) As represented by Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*. First edition (New York, 1970); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968); and George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, volume one, Chapters 7 and 8.

[53](#) For my criticism of Jordan's *White Over Black*, see *The Invention of the White Race*, especially, 1:8-13.

[54](#) *Wages*, p. 17, n. 31. The cited pages, 125-47, comprise Chapters 7 and 8 of George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport Connecticut, 1972) This volume is the first of the 19 volumes of Rawick's *The American Slave: A Composite Biography*.

[55](#) Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, pp. 126-27. The Genovese quotation appears on p. 105 of Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York, 1969).

[56](#) Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, 1967), translated from the French by Charles Lam Markmann from *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris, 1952).

[57](#) That is the title and theme of Chapter II of Jordan's *White Over Black*.

[58](#) *Wages*, p. 150. The phrases are found in *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 159 and p. 165.

[59](#) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963; Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Translation: Constance Farrington), "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," pp. 249-310; esp., pp. 264-70, 275.

[60](#) *Wages*, p. 10.

[61](#) Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York, 1967), p. 12. I have translated this passage as it appears in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, p. 9.

[62](#) *Ibid.*, p. 309.

[63](#) *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 10-11,

[64](#) As Dana Frank, in her review of *Wages of Whiteness*, quite logically, though paradoxically infers, "the white workers *paid themselves* a 'psychological wage'...." (Dana Frank, "A Class About Race," *Socialist Review*, 24 [1995], 243-250; p. 245 [emphasis added]).

[65](#) *Wages*, p. 13.

[66](#) *Wages*, second edition, p. 186.

[67](#) Thompson, p. 364.

[68](#) Until it was illegalized under the Combination Act of 29 July 1800 (40 Geo. 3, c. 106) providing hard-labor imprisonment for violators. That law was repealed by an act passed 21 June 1824. (*Great Britain: The Lion at Home, A Documentary History of Domestic Policy, 1689-1973*, 4 vols., ed. Joel H. Wiener [New York, 1974], 1:670-71, 932-33.)

[69](#) Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 711. "From 1830 onwards," writes Thompson, "a more clearly-defined class consciousness, in the customary Marxist sense, was appearing in which working people were aware of continuing both old and new battles on their own." (p. 712)

[70](#) This action was taken at a meeting of the General Council on May 14, 1872, attended by 23 members, with only one voting in favor. (*The General Council of the First International - Minutes*, 4 volumes [Moscow, n.d.]. See the volume for 1871-1872, pp. 193-99, and 297-300.)

[71](#) From Thompson's monumental study, it is clear that there was no all-consuming "British identity" in England that operated to exclude the Irish or Anglo-African workers from various forms of laboring-class and artisan resistance to the social degradation resulting from capitalist industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Irish workers, who were by then present in large numbers in England, indeed were to be found among the leadership of the struggles of the English working class of that time, even in the era of frequent "Protestant Ascendancy" agitation. (E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [New York, 1964], pp. 432-33, and 805. Irish historian R. F. Foster notes that "high claims have been made for the Irish influence in the struggles of the [English -TWA] radical movements from the 1820s on. Labour leaders like John O'Doherty were prominent from the 1820s, followed by Feargus O'Connor and Bronterre O'Brien in Chartism." (R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600 to 1972* [New York, Penguin edition, 1959], p. 365.)

Thompson mentions "a coloured tailor called Robert Wedderburn [who] promoted a...journal: 'The Forlorn Hope, or a Call to the Supine,'" and who was the author of another work titled *The Axe Laid to the Root*. (pp. 615, 806.) More than twenty years after Thompson's book was published, the role of Wedderburn in the leadership of the English laboring-class "ultra-radical" movement in the first three decades of the nineteenth century England was the subject of a distinguished study by Iain D.

McCalman, in which half a dozen other revolutionary-minded West Indians of African descent are also mentioned. (See *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, edited and introduced by Iain McCalman [New York, 1991].)

[72](#) *Wages*, 2nd edition, pp.187-88.

[73](#) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Part II. That principle was articulated in the early days of establishment of national religions in Europe: "*Cuius regio, eius, religio.*" ("Whatever the king's religion is, is to be the religion of the realm.")

[74](#) *Wages*, pp. 9, 10.

[75](#) *Wages*, p. 7. Roediger cites Cox, p. 470. Cox's book, *Caste, Class, and Race, A Study of Social Dynamics* (New York, 1948), is a 600-page study, complete with extensive footnotes and an approximately 600-entry bibliography. Whether or not one agrees with Cox's concept of revolution, or his general treatment of the subject of "race and class," it is a substantial and time-honored thesis. Cox's work remains significant, as witness the re-publication, twenty-six years after his death, of the final section of the book, titled "Race." (See *Race: a Study in Social Dynamics*, introduction by Adolph Reed, Jr. [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000]). His argument presents a challenge to "Roediger's neo-Marxist" explanation of the origin of white supremacism in the United States working class. Cox, a Marxist-oriented African-American sociologist, who taught at Lincoln University, died in 1974.

[76](#) *Wages*, second edition, pp. 188-89.

[77](#) Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, 3rd ed. (1894), pp. 156-57, (The title page in error identifies it as the second edition. The respective dates of the three editions are: 1878, 1885, and 1894.)

[78](#) *Feuerbach*, p. 380. Feuerbach (1804-1872) published his most important work, *The Essence of Christianity*, in 1841.

[79](#) Engels, *Feuerbach*, pp. 390-91.

[80](#) James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York, 1988), p. 854. Keeping in mind the purchasable exemptions from the Federal draft that were available to the relatively small proportion of more prosperous citizens, it may be assumed that wage laborers made up a very large part of the 360,000 Union military deaths. At least 260,000 rebels died in the war. Between 1860 and 1865, the cost of living rose 116 percent while wages rose by only 43 per cent, representing reduction of real wages by more than a third. (Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, [New York, 1955], p. 24.) According to MacPherson, real wages in the South were reduced by more than 80% in 1862. (*Battle Cry of Freedom*, p. 440.)

[81](#) Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), Chapter One, "Slavery and Industry in the Old South"; loc. cit., p. 11. Note also Chapter Three, "Patterns of Resistance and Repression." See also Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History* (New York, 1927), Chapter I, "Slavery and Industrialism," esp. pp. 14-21. For particular industry studies, see: Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of the Cotton Mills in the South*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, ser. xxxix, no. 2 (Baltimore, 1921; Peter Smith reprint, 1966), pp. 209-13; and Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* (New York, 1930; A. M. Kelly reprint, 1968); Charles B. Dew, "Disciplining slave iron workers in the ante-bellum South: Coercion, conciliation, and accommodation," *American Historical Review*, 79(1974): 398-418.

[82](#) Starobin, pp.82, 83. Starobin cites at least eight primary sources. Among them are two letters and a personal journal of employers in gold mining, turpentine operations, and river improvement projects, respectively, concerning absenteeism of men who went to spend time with their families.

[83](#) *Wages*, p. 134,

[84](#) Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History* (New York, 1927), p. 34.

[85](#) Leon F. Litwak, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), p. 154, citing Jacques P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America* (Dublin, 1792), pp. 282-83.

[86](#) Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, Chapter Three.

[87](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 83.

[88](#) *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, Herbert Aptheker, ed. (New York, 1951), pp. 61-62.

[89](#) *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[90](#) *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[91](#) *Ibid.*, p. 279.

[92](#) David calls it "tragic." (*Wages*, pp. 13, 176, 181.)

[93](#) *Wages*, 2nd edition, Afterword," p. 189. With the projected demographic shift, Roediger writes, in a more recent article, white males will play a better role in the labor movement. He foresees a possible displacement of "black-white" issues by "black-immigrant relations" that he believes will move "white workers in a progressive direction." ("The End of Whiteness? Reflections on a Demographic Landmark," Guest

Editor, David Roediger, *New Labor Forum*, Spring/Summer, 2001, 49-62; Editor's Introduction, p. 51.

[94](#) Roediger, *New Labor Forum*, "The End of Whiteness?," p. 50.

[95](#) See particularly, Dana Frank, "A Couple of White Chicks," a review of Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, in *The Nation*. February 17, 1992. Frank comments that Blee "shatters any illusions we might hold that politics sorts out into a tidy spectrum with feminists, anti-racists and socialists arrayed on one side and sexists, white supremacists and capitalists on the other." For the history of the problem of white supremacy in the woman's suffrage movement, see, inter alia, Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks": Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986); and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *Afro-Americans in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998). See also, the discussion of the campaign for women's suffrage, as it was pressed in South Carolina, in Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

[96](#) As the ruling class contemplates this situation, it is certain that they will keep in mind the following bit of wisdom set down by James Madison in 1788: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed..." (James Madison, *The Federalist*, Number 51, in *The Federalist Papers*, ed., Clinton Rossiter, with a New Introduction and Notes by Charles R. Kesler [New York, 1999], p. 290.)

[97](#) "Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States," *The Communist*, 10, February 1931, pp, 153-54.

[98](#) In the context of the times, such was the unmistakable implication of the assertion that "The fight for socialism...alone can permanently solve the Negro agrarian and national question in the deep South." (Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* [New York, 1948], p. 217.)