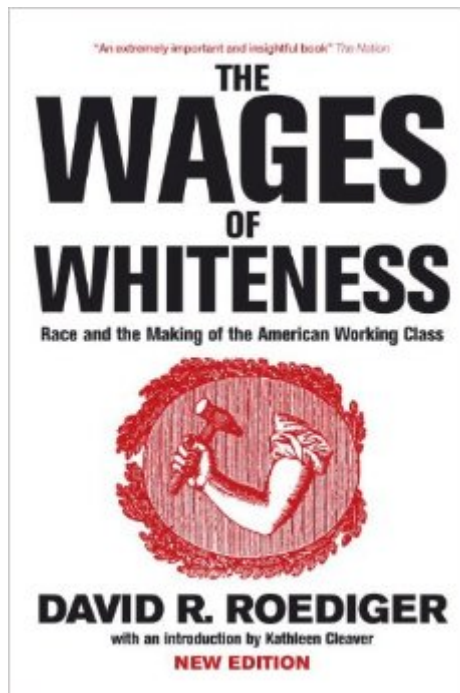


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# The Wages Of Whiteness: Race And The Making Of The American Working Class (Haymarket Series)



## Synopsis

Combining classical Marxism, psychoanalysis, and the new labor history pioneered by E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, David Roediger's widely acclaimed book provides an original study of the formative years of working-class racism in the United States. This, he argues, cannot be explained simply with reference to economic advantage; rather, white working-class racism is underpinned by a complex series of psychological and ideological mechanisms that reinforce racial stereotypes, and thus help to forge the identities of white workers in opposition to Blacks. In a new preface, Roediger reflects on the reception, influence, and critical response to *The Wages of Whiteness*, while Kathleen Cleaver's insightful introduction hails the importance of a work that has become a classic.

## Book Information

Series: Haymarket Series

Paperback: 195 pages

Publisher: Verso; New Edition edition (July 17, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1844671453

ISBN-13: 978-1844671458

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.6 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (15 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #182,602 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #126 in [Books > Business & Money > Economics > Labor & Industrial Relations](#) #126 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Labor & Industrial Relations](#) #270 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Political Economy](#)

## Customer Reviews

David Roediger examines the growth and social construction of racism as it was related to the working classes of the nineteenth century. His scholarship earned him the Organization of American Historians Merle Curti Prize for US Social History in 1991. This work is brief, but dense in analysis, argument and scholarly interpretations. The book basically explores how white workers (with an emphasis on Irish Americans) sought after a "wage" for their color, by placing on Black Americans the mantle of "other", objectifying and stratifying blacks into an object of prejudice and discrimination. After a lengthy discussion of the historiography of labor and race issues, Roediger

writes eloquently of the cultural formation of words such as slave, servant, hired hand, freeman, white slave, master and boss. All of which, he argues, were used to differentiate between blacks and white laborers. He is careful to point out that it was the workers themselves who created the terms as a means to divide the races and elevate whites on the hierarchy of social status. It is a convincing argument. The text concludes with an enlightening discussion of "black face" and the social struggles of the Irish, whom many felt in the majority viewed as "white negroes." This book is scholarly and a read that demands one's attention.

This book tackles the difficult subject of race relations among the working class of America. The time frame for this book is generally from 1800 through the Civil war, as America was turning from an agricultural society to an industrial society. Slavery was drawing to a close, immigration had increased, and the urban populations of American cities were growing. All of these elements combined to create an urban working class complete with racial tension. Within this context, David R. Roediger defines the attitudes of race and race relation in a manner that is unique to most histories of urban studies. He not only records the developments of a racial identity, but he also examines the reasons why the white community defined itself as well as how the white community defined other groups. This book will probably stir a lot of controversy, but it will also answer many questions. Any historian or urban studies major can benefit from this book, but beyond college level readers, anyone interested in racial identities and racial differences can also appreciate this book.

Let it be said from the outset that Roediger is an American Labor Historian, and although this is a book about race, it is also a book about the way class and race are so intertwined. I think it is somewhat amusing that so many people find Roediger racist against whites, I don't think he is: he is more interested in the way race and class became nearly unified concepts in the formation of the American Working Class during the nineteenth century. As Roediger points out, Working class became in many ways, white working class: which is no surprise considering that most works of labor history before the 1960s (and even most afterwards) concerned themselves only with white men. This of course leads to a minor fault in his work: gender is not fully considered (but at 180 pages, this is understandable). Dana Frank's "Purchasing Power" would be a good work to get a small glimpse of that piece of the puzzle. Overall, a great work of historical scholarship that should be read by every serious historian.

This book looks at the very interesting question of why the American labor movement did not

embrace the cause of Black emancipation and civil right. On the surface it would seem that the two would have enough in common to share a common cause. Not so argues Roedinger. In fact he argues that the emerging industrial worker of the mid to late 19th century who was low skilled and often times a recent immigrant from Ireland or Germany had an even more powerful interest in distancing themselves from the degradation that was associated with Blacks and the jobs that they performed. While this would seem counter intuitive, Roedinger argues that many unskilled white workers gained a type of social legitimacy from separating themselves from non-white labor and gaining for themselves the status of being seen as White American workers. While the beginning of the book is a little dense as the author tries to tease out the changing meaning of different terms for labor and racial categories in the pre and post Civil War period, this only sets the stage for more concrete example in the second half when he examines the experiences of Irish immigrant laborers in the later chapters. This is an interesting book in that it examines race from the perspective of what it means to be White and the social implications of that. It reminds the reader that the social categorization of race is dependent on opposition and that this opposition is in no way a natural or concrete boundary but rather a dynamic social construct that all Americans should be aware of.

This is a classic work on white racism and its genesis. Roedinger takes the reader in thorough examination of the effects of whiteness...it is a great resource book for papers....

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