An Interdisciplinary Journal

<http://www.netsoljournal.net/>

Volume 3, Issue 2, pp.52-55, Fall 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24819/netsol2018.07>

Date Submitted: December 10, 2018 **Date Accepted:** December 27, 2018

Book Review

David Roediger. *Class, Race, and Marxism*. Brooklyn and London: Verso Books, 2018.

Key Words: Marxism, Race, Class, African-American, Whiteness

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David Roediger is a Professor of American Studies and History at the University of Kansas. A Marxist and Labor historian, his writings have impacted the way study of what the late scholar Cedric Robinson termed “racial capitalism.” David Roediger’s recent publication *Class, Race, and Marxism* is an urgent contribution to this historiography and an essential read for scholars and activists alike. In *Class, Race, and Marxism* Roediger aims to redirect activists and scholars from the false dichotomy of the “race or class” debate that has reemerged in the wake of the Ferguson Uprising. The study is separated into two parts. In the first part, Roediger examines the ways historians have come to write about race and class. Part two of the text reaches into the past to deliver a relational history of race, class, and also gender using an intersectional analysis to explain the ways in which racial formations have informed the logic of capital.

Roediger’s first book *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, first published in 1991, was a paradigm shifting work. Published between Mike Davis’ *Prisoners of the American Dream* (1986) and Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995) and alongside Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Roediger helped to develop the discipline of whiteness studies. Whiteness studies, in its original formation, emerged as a response to the immediate political questions amongst the American Left in the 1980s. Following the overwhelming support for Ronald Reagan’s presidency in 1980 by the white working class, Marxists had to finally recognize that objective conditions alone do not organize workers and influence social change. Instead, subjective factors such as racial ideology were equally powerful forces in society.

Confronted with that political challenge, Roediger found the answers to problem of class and whiteness embedded in the long literary tradition of Black Studies. From the writings of enslaved people, to the new Negro literature of WEB Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, to the Civil Rights-era literature of James Baldwin, it was black writers, who had first interrogated the issue of race and class that white labor historians had either abandoned or relegated solely the study of oppressed people. It was amidst antiapartheid struggle that Stuart Hall argued that race is the modality through which class is lived and Cedric Robinson introduced the term *racial capitalism* to the American academy, both underscoring the inseparability of class and race. As Roediger notes in the introduction to *Class, Race, and Marxism*, in *Black Jacobins*, CLR James admonished the separation of racial and class analysis. For James, class was primary but race was never secondary (8).

As radical scholars from Stuart Hall to Vijay Prashad have shown, neoliberalism has shifted the discussion of race, class, and power from structural analysis to highly individualized anecdotes and solutions. Departing from its original intention, whiteness studies and the popular discussions of “white privilege” have been reduced to the examination of individual and interpersonal benefits of racism, Roediger explains. “I think we may be due for discussion on whether ‘white privilege’ now serves us well in naming patterns of white advantage inside a system in which most people are miserable” Roediger writes (20).

In *Class, Race, and Marxism*, Roediger intervenes in the study of race and class and gender in a different political moment. For Roediger, the highly charged conversations over race, class and solidarity in the age of Black Lives Matter offers useful lessons. Noting a variety of positions that are either class reductive or racially reductive in their analysis, Roediger notes the highly publicized comments of David Harvey, Adolph Reed, Cedric Johnson, and Ta Nehisi Coates, all of whom fell on different sides of the debate. Instead of dismissing both sides, as he might have done in the past, Roediger’s book makes an important rejection of the patriarchal and vitriolic debates of race and class that occurred in the nexus of the Black Lives Matter activism and the Bernie Sanders’ campaign in 2015. Rejecting both sides, Roediger shows more favor to the work of Black feminist scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor despite its own contradictions. In *From #BLackLivesMatter to BLack Liberation*, Roediger notes that Taylor makes a valuable “effort to take race and class struggles seriously” and “is a cause for optimism that ‘race or class’ sterilities might give way” (17).

Part one of *Class, Race, and Marxism* examines historiography. The first chapter “The Retreat from Race and Class” further engages the lengthy discussion Roediger began in his introduction. At the opening of the twentieth century, WEB Du Bois famously quipped that the problem of the new century was “the color line”, while American socialist hero Eugene Debs offered a class struggle void of color. “As the twenty-first century starts, the idea of colorless struggle for human progress is unfortunately back with a vengeance,” Roediger writes (34). Highlighting Mike Davis’s response to Hurricane Katrina, Roediger shows that critical historical materialist analysis makes the division of class and race unnecessary (45). The second chapter, “Accounting for the Wages of Whiteness” recaptures the Marxist history of whiteness studies from the lukewarm liberal analysis embodied by writers such as Tim Wise. The final essay in part one is in many ways a lecture to white radicals and scholars on racial solidarity and antiracist self-

activity entitled “The White Intellectual among Thinking Black Intellectuals: George Rawick and the Settings of Genius,” an ode to Roediger’s mentor.

The second part of the book “Histories: The Past and Present of Race and Class” consist of three essays. Roediger begins with what is arguably the strongest segment of the text. In chapter four, titled “Removing Indians, Managing Slaves, and Justifying Slavery: The Case for Intersectionality,” Roediger captures another critical term, *intersectionality*, from the grasp of liberal and neoliberal pundits, to show the crucial role it plays in the analysis of political economy and the generation of mass political struggle. Roediger examines the crucial role “settler colonialism and the gendered social reproduction of the enslaved labor force were to reproducing a slaveholder-led cross-class alliance that undergirded” American westward expansion in the early nineteenth century (29). With a clear, if uncited, engagement of the work of radical women scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Natalia Molina, Roediger argues for the presence of what Molina calls *racial scripts* in her work. “Thus the defense of slavery in the eyes of masters themselves, and from the charges of critics, was deeply ‘intersectional’,” Roediger writes (103). Slave owners used notions of management and cultivation to that connected to the control of land to the control of Native and African American reproductive and productive labor. Shifting from the antebellum south, chapter five “One Symptom of Originality’: Race and the Management of Labor in US History,” moves to the global stage. Offering importance to Hall’s proposition four decades ago, Roediger shows racial competition to be only one component of the bond of race and management. “The idea of a hierarchically understood process of ‘racial development’ undergirded slavery, settler expansion, and industrial capitalist growth, making the ability to manage other races a distinctly ‘white’ contribution to civilization,” Roediger writes (123). This notion makes the end-of-chapter argument that this hierarchy kept African Americans out of occupations “via color bars and judging their fitness as a reserve army of labor” absolutely crucial to not only the academic study of race but also to Black Lives Matter and prison abolitionist movements (155).

Chapter Six, “Making Solidarity Uneasy: Cautions on a Keyword from Black Lives Matter to the Past” serves as the conclusion of the text. Returning to the original question of the book, academic responses to Black Lives Matter and the Ferguson Uprising, Roediger examines the elusiveness of solidarity in radical historiography “and discusses how we out to historicize and memorialize the word.” “It remains critical to make a case for embracing solidarity while simultaneously being uneasy about the assumptions it sometimes evokes,” Roediger writes (159). Noncritical histories of solidarity can, and often, reinforce normative notions of gender, class, and nationality as Roediger notes in his revisiting of the historiography on Bacon’s Rebellion and other “class struggles.” Equally, debates over solidarity and alliance have formed wedges in movements and stymied mass mobilization. However, just as Roediger confronted as with the “race or class” argument, the he rejects separatism and the reductive idea that would suggest an injury to one is an injury to all.

Class, Race, and Marxism is representative of many books published by Verso. It is highly accessible and moderately priced. It shows a crucial balance between academic writing and public intellectualism. Keeping with his writing form, Roediger’s work could equally be used for radical organizers and college lecturers. However, this is not an introductory text to Marxism. Helpfully,

Roediger uses footnotes to guide readers but a glossary or an appendix would have been a useful feature to assist in the comprehension for the novice readers.