Response to Eric Arnesen

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Abstract

Proliferation in recent years of a literature that seeks to examine the sources, content, and meanings of whiteness in American life stems from several factors. Among these are: (1) the sociology of academic trends; (2) the growth in recent decades of new academic specialties and interdisciplinary studies that accelerate the velocity of interpretive tendencies and problematiques; (3) reaction against a perceived retreat in civic and academic discussion, and national political life, during the 1980s and 1990s from acknowledgement of the historical and persisting force of racial stratification and inequality; and 4) the combination of atrophy of extramural Left politics and heightened perceptions of the political significance of academic debates. Most consequentially, as Professor Arnesen maintains, the turn to "whiteness studies" emerges from a version of the question crystallized more than a century ago by Werner Sombart, "Why is there no socialism in America?" The literature produced under this rubric is generally marred by conceptual ambiguities, ahistorical formulations, and lack of interpretive discipline. Particularly as it engages labor history and the work of labor historians, the whiteness literature is anchored in the hoary, and fundamentally miscast, debate over the centrality of racial versus class dynamics in shaping working-class experience and American politics.

Eric Arnesen has provided a very careful and judicious critical inventory of the scholarship that has proliferated in recent years around the theme of the genesis, significance, and operations of the notion of "whiteness" in American history. This literature has taken hold in several disciplines and sub-fields, but from the first it has engaged with the discourse and practice of labor historians. Professor Arnesen's effort and acuity in surveying this node of scholarship from the standpoint of its impact on the labor history field are much to be appreciated. In my remarks I will mainly attempt to tease out some implications of his arguments and propose a perhaps slightly different perspective on a few of his characterizations.

The speed and range with which the "whiteness" trope has spread through the academy provokes several questions: Why has this notion become so popular? Why whiteness in particular? And why now? One general response to the first question, drawn from consideration of the sociological dynamics of academic life, is that whiteness studies are popular partly because they are popular. That is, academic trends can move not unlike fads. An apparently new formulation can develop a constituency and expand rapidly on the basis of explanatory or interpretive promise presumed to inhere in its novelty, prior to demonstrated payoff. This is not unique to whiteness studies or to the current moment; indeed, it may be a feature of the natural process through which scholarly knowl-

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 60, Fall 2001, pp. 69–80
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

edge evolves. New, more or less eccentric formulations arise as the accretion of scholarship and changing interpretive context call (or at least provide opportunities) for modification or reinterpretation of conventional understandings. Some attain traction because they promise to yield better or fresher answers to persisting questions, allow for raising new, presumably sharper or more pertinent questions, or otherwise resonate with concerns meaningful within a community of scholars.

Many of those that gain adherents fizzle as their promise fails to translate into enhanced understanding or generative interpretation, or as they prove inadequate as platforms for launching and sustaining subsequent inquiry. Some persist, occasionally thriving, even though they fail on such intellectual grounds, because they connect with significant cultural or ideological sensibilities or develop an institutional base within disciplines. The rational choice movement in political science is a recent example of this sort of entrenchment based on extra-intellectual criteria.

Arguably, the relative democratization of academic life over the last generation or two has demystified this process through broader exposure, in rather the same way that relative democratization of professional sports has demystified the lives and behavior of athletes. Not unrelatedly, elaboration of a reflective discourse on the practices of intellectual inquiry, beginning with the publication of Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962) in the early 1960s, has made us more conscious than previously of the sociological imperatives at work in shaping what we do. This attentiveness to what we might see as the historicity of our craft has been further amplified and embellished by introduction of the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School and the profusion in the past two decades of critical perspectives associated with what has been summarily described as the "linguistic turn" or turn to discourse analysis.

This sociological dynamic likely has accelerated as a combined effect of the conditions of intellectual speedup that confront us all as scholars now and the increased potential for broad visibility occasioned by the appearance of the "public intellectual," as well as the increasing market-sensitivity of academic presses and the proliferation of self-consciously interdisciplinary fields of inquiry. Increased expectations regarding quantity and visibility of publication produce a fetish of the "cutting edge," and publishers' more intense preferences for books with broad or crossover appeal no doubt exacerbate this pressure. At the same time, consolidation of interdisciplinary fields may have facilitated the circulation of intellectual trends by making disciplinary boundaries more permeable. While some of these interdisciplinary fields—for instance, women's studies, African-American studies, and the various geographically defined area studies—proceed from practical concerns with apprehending related facets of a given subject matter, some, like cultural studies, take their identity from rejection in principle, typically on epistemic grounds, of the autonomy of disciplines. This stance supports an aggressive commitment to crossing disciplinary boundaries, which in turn encourages the propagation of interpretive trends.

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Considering these sociological dynamics is helpful for placing the whiteness phenomenon in perspective. Its relatively swift ascendancy is partly an expression of processes at work more broadly in the contemporary academy. However, although it can help account for the velocity with which the whiteness trope has spread, this explanation does not answer the other key questions: Why whiteness? And why now? It is here that Professor Arnesen's assessment is especially astute.

Arnesen argues that the whiteness literature, at least insofar as it approaches labor history, emanates from a version of Werner Sombart's classic question: Why is there no socialism in the United States? From this perspective, the whiteness notion has emerged as a response to a perceived failure of white workers to embrace consistently a political practice in which the interests of working-class solidarity override racism or nativism as an ideology and the given realities of racial stratification. Professor Arnesen's assessment helps to situate the whiteness notion's appeal within a genus of intellectual responses to the apparent defeat of the Left in the United States, and particularly the apparent failure of class-based leftist politics to withstand the lure of a largely racialized politics of *ressentiment* associated first with the national appeal of George Wallace in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then with the rise and consolidation of Reaganism in the 1980s and 1990s. A parallel response is the emergence in the social sciences of a literature on "new social movements," which ostensibly mobilize around political statuses and identities other than class, including elective affinities such as opposition to drunk driving or support for environmental preservation, and communities of interest defined on the basis of noneconomic criteria, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or neighborhood. This literature typically characterizes such movements as supplanting older forms of class-based politics and as more meaningful, effective, and appropriate sources of political dynamism in the current era.

Both the focus on new social movements and the emphasis on the role of whiteness in shaping political allegiances are linked to a broader theoretical assertion of the primacy of noneconomic, largely ascriptive identities as sources of collective consciousness and solidarity and as motivators of political action. This is why articulating clearly the boundaries and terrain of "identity politics" is so difficult, either within academic practice or in civic life. Despite adherents' tempering assertions to the contrary, as an intellectual and political rubric, identity politics and the intellectual programs that constitute it cohere principally around rejection of class as a heuristic or interpretive category and as a basis for orienting politics. To that extent, the rubric is defined ultimately by what it is not, by the kinds of interpretations to which it is an alternative instead of shared affirmative claims regarding method, approach, substantive interpretations, or objects of inquiry. More significantly for the present discussion, the identity rubric and its associated interpretive tendencies are rooted in a controversy as old as—and one that in fact flows from—Sombart's question; they reproduce a pole in the race/class debate that has haunted leftist intellectual life in the United States, albeit in differing forms, for more than a century.

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As Professor Arnesen argues, Sombart's question and the pattern of debate it has stimulated create more difficulties for understanding the realities and evolution of politics among American workers—as individuals and groups and as enacted through their class institutions—than they resolve. The question itself presumes a political teleology from which the actual history of the American working class supposedly has deviated and that it is, therefore, the deviation which must be explained. This way of framing the issue is, or should be, anathema to any decent historian. Among other problems, it disposes toward painting with overly broad brush strokes, for example, in the use of such questionable devices as retrospective psychoanalytic speculation, because its teleological premises substitute for careful exploration of the ways that actual workers have understood the nature of the social, political, and economic contexts they inhabited and the practical options that confronted them. This quickly leads, as successive scholarly iterations summarize and abstract from prior formulations, to a discourse driven, as Herbert Butterfield complained already in the 1930s in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York, 1965 [1931]), by categories "incapable of concrete visualization." The whiteness literature's tendency to generate shorthand, reified formulations such as pursuit, approximation, or attainment of whiteness exemplifies this problem. The result is, again as Professor Arnesen observes, a tendency to construe whiteness ahistorically, as a unitary phenomenon or all-purpose metaphor whose sources are unclear and whose content is evanescent.

The effect is to substitute ontology for history, as is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). Jacobson's account reads out, without mediation, from the commitments to racial ideology visible in the discourse of white, upper-class men—politicians, intellectuals, novelists—to far larger claims about the thinking and beliefs of "whites." This conflation is problematic on at least two counts. First, it leads Jacobson to overestimate what he has found. After all, it would not seem so novel or surprising to find evidence that a ruling class discourse rested on consensual assumptions of the existence of naturalized social hierarchy. Only by imagining that these assumptions shaped the thinking and practices of the nonelite population in the same ways as well does his discovery seem remarkable. Second, Jacobson's conflation leads him to divorce the evolution of racial discourse from the discrete dynamics of social relations, political economy, power, and political institutions that have shaped American political culture. This in turn leaves him without a concrete basis for explaining the origins of racial ideology and, therefore, his central category, whiteness. He seeks them in the same domain that he mines for his other evidence, the realm of elite ideas. Race and racial hierarchy, in his view, emerged from notions of "otherness" embedded in the Enlightenment and implanted in the New World. That is, Jacobson ontologizes race and whiteness as endemic products of an abstract Western culture.

This creates other interpretive difficulties. He acknowledges that at least through much of the seventeenth century a distinction between Christian and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

heathen was more potent as a determinant of civic status than what later would be understood as race. Even so, Jacobson treats this distinction as merely anticipating, possibly even only masking, racial ideology and white supremacy. This sort of ahistorical formulation also muddles Jacobson's effort to describe how whiteness operates. His narrative fails to specify the agency that has conferred or withheld access to whiteness. (This is a difficulty that plagues much of the whiteness literature, as Arnesen notes, especially Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* [New York, 1995], which fails utterly to follow through on its central promise. However, even scholarship in this vein that succeeds in presenting a more complex, grounded picture of the fluid dynamics of racial identity, antagonism, and interracial solidarity—such as James R. Barrett's and David Roediger's "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class"[1]—is confronted with similar difficulties in specifying agency.) Ironically for a project that sets out to challenge the premises of racial essentialism, Jacobson's interpretation essentializes whiteness as a phenomenon that transcends and directs history even as he wants to construe it as the product of evolving social relations.

The race/class conundrum that lies beneath whiteness discourse orients inquiry around a mindset that Arnesen characterizes aptly as a "Marxism lite." Yet this Marxism light typically is embraced as a conceptual starting point only to be rejected as inadequate. I suspect that it is partly this rhetorical move that prompts Professor Arnesen to conclude that the whiteness literature offers little that is new. It is hardly news among labor historians that simplistic expectations regarding the force of a general logic of interracial class solidarity fail on empirical and historical grounds. Proceeding from bold announcement of that failure does seem redundant on its face, and a literature anchored to that proclamation easily can rankle as an affront to decades of rich scholarship that has grappled with the complex intersections of patterns of racialized stratification in the processes through which workers have formed, understood, and pursued their interests in American history. From that perspective much of the whiteness literature does seem thin and overly schematic in its theoretical aspirations. Moreover, like another offshoot of cultural studies, the literature on everyday forms of resistance, it begs questions concerning exactly what orthodoxy it purports to challenge, what interpretive or ideological tendencies it wishes to counter. Just as the resistance studies seem geared to respond to positions long discarded from serious academic debate—variants of Stanley Elkins's "sambo" thesis and comparable presumptions that people blindly acquiesce to oppression and injustice—the whiteness literature often seems animated by dissent from a straw construction of Marxism, Beardianism, or other dispositions that deny the force of racism and racialist ideologies within the working class as in American history more generally. Because clear instances of such dispositions have not been the norm within respectable scholarly circles in labor history for quite some time, the posture of righteous assault on a stale, retrograde orthodoxy that frequently frames the whiteness scholarship can seem irksome. As with resistance studies, it can also give the appearance of avoiding difficult interpretive issues in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

favor of easy pieties and of not seriously addressing the existing state of discussion in the field.

To some extent, this posture is an artifact of the political exuberance that has propelled the history of struggles to democratize the academy and that has been reinforced as the apparent urgency of those struggles has loomed larger in relation to the diminishing terrain for leftist political engagement elsewhere. Here as well the growth of interdisciplinary fields may be a factor. Insofar as those fields at least inadvertently favor breadth over depth, they help produce an intellectual climate that supports sweeping, all too frequently naïve judgments about the consensual state of entire disciplines, as, for instance, anthropology has been reduced to a symbol of imperialist "othering" for much of postcolonial and cultural studies, despite the discipline's far more complex and contested history.

Scholarly interest in whiteness clearly grows from the nexus of political, civic, and intellectual concerns, and on this point I would propose a perspective that may be somewhat more sympathetic than Professor Arnesen's. In labor history, as in other fields in the humanities and social sciences, we have witnessed in recent decades the consolidation of central discursive tendencies that have broadened the field's purview to make it richer and more inclusive. This broadening has been coincident with and spurred by the general expansion of opportunity structures in the academic profession for nonwhite scholars and a heightened sensitivity regarding the profound and complex role of racial stratification in the constitution of the American experience. However, the rightward shift in politics outside the university during the same period has encouraged a public discourse that challenges each of those gains and their intellectual foundations, as well as, more consequentially, the broader framework of egalitarian victories that have been won in the society at large since the civil rights movement and even the New Deal.

Several entailments of this extramural political shift bear directly on the intellectual and ideological project undergirding the whiteness literature. The triumph of Reaganism has been widely interpreted by political scientists and pundits (although not quite accurately, as Michael Zweig shows in *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* [Ithaca, 2000]) as resulting from a defection of the white, male, working-class base from the Democrats' liberal program. This interpretation provoked calls for reformulating Democratic liberalism to reconnect with that supposedly disaffected constituency. One strain of those calls, reminiscent of the Liberal Republicans' advocacy of abandoning a "divisive" race issue in the 1870s and 1880s, has urged retreat from the appearance of being too closely identified with matters of racial justice and the concerns of minorities. Not only has this view been reflected institutionally in the Democratic Leadership Council and the policy orientation (as distinct from the symbolic political gestures) of Clintonism; it has also attained currency in the public intellectual circles that overlap academic networks and intellectual practices. Liberal scholars such as William Julius Wilson, Theda Skocpol, and Paul

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Starr, to name a few of the most prominent, have been visible proponents of the view that explicit focus on racial inequality is divisive and politically counterproductive. This position has frequently organized the pages of the liberal opinion-shaping journals that carry weight in academic circles, such as *The New Republic* and *The American Prospect* and has surfaced occasionally even in more left-leaning venues such as *The Nation.*

Of course, the shift in the national political climate has had ramifications on academic conventions. These are most obvious and immediate in the social sciences, which are more directly sensitive to contemporary politics and policy debates. Psychology has seen a resurgent respectability of scientific racism and related forms of inegalitarianism worthy of the nineteenth century, and economics has become almost completely dominated by free market theology and militant skepticism regarding all forms of social intervention. In political science, the popularity of the rational choice movement has, to paraphrase Marx, elevated the mentality of the counting-house to the level of social theory, with effects similar to, though on a less extensive scale than, the trend in economics; in sociology the study of inequality has been largely transfigured into a narrative cataloguing the putative deficiencies of poor people. To be sure, the internal practices and governing mental regimes of labor history have not only been immune from this shift; they have provided one of the most important sources of substantive counterweight. Yet the field's marginalization in universities over this period is testament to its atypicality.

Part of the impetus driving the scholarly tendency seeking to problematize whiteness is reaction against these intellectual and ideological currents. That motivation should be noted and applauded. Both the frankly conservative attack on egalitarian policies and ideas and liberal accommodations declaring or exhorting to the "declining significance of race," in Professor Wilson's polysemous phrase, have prompted many Left-inclined scholars to reassert the realities of racial stratification. In this overcharged ideological context, it is not difficult to understand how otherwise solid and important scholarship, such as Iver Bernstein's *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* [New York, 1989] or Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* [New York, 1984], could fuel concerns that labor history itself had been invaded by the new backlash. Bernstein's account of the draft riots, on skeptical reading, can seem to downplay the significance of anti-black racism as a focal point of rioters' outrage, and Wilentz's narrative of working-class formation equally can appear to skirt race as an issue. These concerns and the political motivations on which they rest—particularly reaction to the rhetoric surrounding the Reagan Democrat phenomenon—no doubt also underlie the tendency in some of the whiteness literature to go overboard in the opposite direction. Some accounts, for instance, David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991), appear to treat racism almost as the exclusive product of white workers themselves.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ironically, this reproduces the perspective of patrician race liberalism and racial elite-brokerage politics and undermines this scholarship's avowedly leftist political commitments.

Some of what Professor Arnesen correctly identifies as problematic about the whiteness literature derives from its sometimes overly enthusiastic, conceptually and strategically undisciplined melding of political and intellectual objectives. Along with the hastiness that can accompany the new interdisciplinarity and the bandwagon effects of academic trendiness, this melded concern gives rise to a sense of moral priority that can brook lack of care and nuance in interpretation, too sweeping claims, anachronistic and murky arguments, bold proclamation of commonplaces, and hyperbolic judgments. All of these defects, as Professor Arnesen argues forcefully, beset the whiteness literature.

The thematization of whiteness nonetheless has embedded within it an important insight and the potential for an equally important new line of inquiry. Beneath faddishness and the novelty of buzzwords, the logic of academic subspecialization and the peculiarities of the current political climate, this new orientation generates interest because it proposes that racial and class status, identity and politics have been fundamentally, and inextricably, linked in the American experience. This insight suggests possibilities for a scholarly focus that reconstructs the evolution of those links and their consequences, both in the past and for contemporary life.

It is true, as Professor Arnesen observes, that the cardinal premise of whiteness scholarship—that race is a social construction—has been a convention of scientific and historical understanding for some time. I am not so sanguine as he is, however, that acknowledgement of this conventional wisdom resolves the issue. It is not at all clear that the practical implications of this formal understanding have been sufficiently elaborated. Popular and academic discussion of racial difference, classification, and identity remains organized largely around essentialist frames of reference. Dominant research programs in public opinion studies, psychology, and even medicine continue to proceed from the presumption of clearly demarcable, unitary populations with common characteristics that can be predicted from common racial classification. Probably most scholars in the social sciences and humanities, even those whose work bears on these issues, still assume that something more fundamental than ideology and location in specific structures of social hierarchy distinguishes race and ethnicity as labels of differentiation. Even the newer academic discourses that have emerged from the academy's democratization typically reify and impute singular, unique purposes and mentalities to complex populations on the basis of racial identity.

Just as with the defeat of Lamarckian race theory on scientific grounds in the early twentieth century, official victory of a new interpretation of racial difference has not displaced settled habits of mind, presumptions, and formulations that shape research and scholarly discourses, much less even generally informed public discussion. Official defeat of biologistic theories of hierarchical racial difference in the last half century has been accommodated by the emergence of a culturalist rhetoric—as in notions of an urban underclass—that rests on imagery

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of racialized differences that are fundamental and intractable. This rhetoric has also attained the status of conventional wisdom, within and outside the academy. All of this indicates that the entailments of the social constructionist insight have not been adequately worked out and absorbed into even serious intellectual discourse. That explicit attempts to rehabilitate theories of scientific racism continue to find inroads to academic respectability underscores this point. Pursuit of a line of inquiry that seeks to historicize carefully and concretely the origins and evolution of racial categorization in relation to specific dynamics of social relations may be the best, if not the only, way to realize the intellectual significance of the constructionist intervention.

It is also true that labor historians in particular have produced a voluminous literature examining the complex, contradictory, and often unpredictable workings of racial stratification and racial ideologies in specific moments and contexts—locales, struggles, organizational and institutional relationships—in American history. Professor Arnesen refers to a good sample of this literature, which also includes his own *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York, 1991) and much other instructive work such as Peter Way's study of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century canal workers, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780–1860* (New York, 1993). Judith Stein's *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill, 1998) is an important recent contribution that details the intricate, dynamic, and often counterintuitive relation of national economic and civil rights policies, racial and trade union politics as they operated locally and nationally within a single industry in the postwar era. Some of this notable scholarship, such as James R. Barrett's *Work and Community in "the Jungle": Chicago's Packing House Workers, 1894–1922* (Urbana, IL, 1987), has been produced by scholars now associated with the examination of whiteness.

Moreover, there is a very rich, important scholarship on the origins and evolution of race and racial ideologies in North America that predates and is unconnected with the whiteness literature. The well-known work of such disparate scholars as Barbara Jeanne Fields, Winthrop Jordan, Thomas Gossett, George Frederickson, George Stocking, Jr., Alexander Saxton, Audrey Smedley, and Reginald Horsman stands out in this respect, as do more recent intellectual histories such as Elazar Barkan's *Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York, 1992) and William H. *Tucker's The Science and Politics of Racial Research* (Urbana, 1994). Edmund Morgan's classic *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975) and Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996) present textured case studies of the development of racial ideology and stratification in colonial Virginia. The potential of the sensibility from which the whiteness trope has emerged lies in the extent to which it grounds itself on and builds from these bodies of scholarship.

Whether or not he would agree that this potential exists, Professor Arne-

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sen has argued convincingly that the interpretive payoff promised by the whiteness scholarship has not been demonstrated. In addition to the limitations of conceptualization and execution that he so thoroughly describes and the factors impelling toward them that I have thus far discussed, I believe that the crucial conceptual inadequacy of the whiteness discourse, the source of its deepest interpretive difficulties, is its failure to break completely with the race/class dichotomy that defines its relationship to what Arnesen characterizes as Marxism lite.

The terms of the race/class debate misdirect the effort to make sense of the relation between class and race in America. This controversy pivots on an axis bounded by two unhelpfully formalistic, artificially separated poles. It is driven by a bias toward monocausal explanation and an impossibly naïve belief that the flux of history can be suspended to permit distilling complex, mutually evolving, dialectical social processes into neatly distinguishable analytical categories that can be weighed against each other as independent social forces. Most pointedly, both poles of this debate approach racial stratification as lying outside the logical or normal development of American capitalist political economy and social relations—on the "class" pole as an epiphenomenon or a random, idiosyncratic artifact; on the "race" pole as an independent ontological reality. Attempts to overcome these defects within the debate's own terms have produced meaningless, reified compromises such as the proposition that racism originally emerges from capitalist social relations but then "takes on a life of its own."

This is not the place to recount this hoary debate's unfortunate history or to parse its myriad expressions. To the extent that it organizes the whiteness discourse it perpetuates a tendency to formulate American racial dynamics on psychological or other bases that are disconnected from political economy and the reproduction of labor relations and attendant political and social structures. The attempt to explain race's role is thus disconnected from the material foundation and engine of American social hierarchy and its ideological legitimations. That leads this literature into culs-de-sac of reification and ontology. Efforts to situate those formulations materially result in convoluted notions like the "possessive investment in whiteness," an updated version of the old idea of "white skin privilege" that was spawned by an earlier instance of the race/class debate in the New Left. Now, as then, this line of argument's inadequacies become clearest as they translate into programs for political action. The whiteness critique, despite its self-consciously political aspirations, has generated nothing more substantial or promising than moral appeals to whites to give up their commitments to, or to "abolish," whiteness. It is difficult to imagine how this program could be anything more than an expression of hopeless desperation or pointless self-righteousness.

The initially intriguing impulse of the whiteness discourse propounded by Professor Roediger and others, that race and class status are intertwined and that their relation should be charted historically and theorized, has been undone by its acceptance of the race/class debate's frame. "Whiteness" ultimately provides an evanescent and ahistorical racial metaphor for a longstanding epicycle

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of American class relations, the filtering and sorting of pools of actual and potential labor as populations organized into a system of ascriptive hierarchy. As the sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox argued more than half a century ago in *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (Garden City, NY, 1948) (Part III of which has just been reissued by Monthly Review Press as *Race)*, that is what race is, no more and no less. Instructively, Roediger's commitment to the race pole of the dichotomy induces him to misread Cox as reducing racism mechanistically to a simple tool of the ruling class.

Rooting race as an ideology and evolving system of social hierarchy within American capitalist labor relations more nearly puts us on the road to pursuing the important questions suggested by the project that produced whiteness studies. This approach, which requires historically specific, concrete examination, points toward the shifting role of racial hierarchy as a technology of civic status that, in constraining or affirming legal and unofficial citizenship rights and prerogatives, is a component of the larger political and economic framework of class power. Workers' normatively recognized civic status has much to do with determining their pragmatic options and circumscribing the contexts within which they define their interests. This perspective also emphasizes the significance of political institutions, law, and public policy in shaping identities and class relations.

Professor Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* sought to explore how a developing racial ideology and system of racial hierarchy defined civic status and contributed to white workers' understandings of themselves and their place in antebellum society. Despite the conceptual flaws and incompleteness of his account, it located the whiteness idea within a specific matrix of social relations. As an academic subspecialty congealed around this account's central trope, the whiteness idea has become an anachronistic, catch-all category that hovers above historical context and political economy; it functions as an independent variable—an unchanging marker of civic acceptability to which differently identified populations at different times have gained or been denied access. Not only does this perception underwrite the many conceptual difficulties and ambiguities that Professor Arnesen discusses, including the conflation of classification as white, embrace of whiteness as a social position, and endorsement of white supremacist ideology; it is also the opposite of a social constructionist view of race. Furthermore, reading settled notions of whiteness back into the past misunderstands the more complicated and fluid evolution of race and racial categories, and their social meanings and consequences, in American history. Most of all, this framework blurs the problem it purports to address. The issue, after all, is not the sources, content, or entailments of an abstract whiteness; it is how the idea of race, racial ideologies, racial identities, and racial stratification have emerged and operated—in varying ways in different contexts—in the shaping of American social relations and politics, among workers as well as others in the society.

Sombart's question is not necessarily inappropriate as a heuristic device, especially for those committed to leftist political programs, so long as it is not encumbered with his teleological baggage. The whiteness literature by and large

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has not successfully jettisoned that baggage, and it has compounded the problem through an ahistorical, fundamentally idealist understanding of race and its relation to the concrete reproduction of, and contestation within, the dynamics of American political economy and social stratification.

NOTES

1. James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (1997):3–44.

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