Charismatic History: Pros and Cons

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Abstract

This comment on the whole agrees with Eric Arnesen's critique of the whiteness historical scholarship. It suggests, however, that Arnesen insufficiently credits David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991) for its achievement as a kind of charismatic history and insufficiently distinguishes between Roediger's book and the work of his emulators. The latter are the source of the multiple meanings of whiteness that Arnesen rightly criticizes, and likewise for the hardening of Roediger's suggestive notions about "becoming white" into a new dogma of American immigration history. This comment concludes by noting that in his book Roediger neglected the language of whiteness and suggests that by attending to that question he would find a response to Arnesen's pessimism over the usefulness of whiteness as an analytical concept.

The fate of most historians is to write history that nobody reads. The most they can hope for is that every now and then a wandering researcher will encounter their work and award them a citation—not more than two or three times, it seems, in the life of most academic articles. At the other extreme are those contributions, like Frederick Jackson Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) that in their day are acclaimed and read, or at least known about, by everyone. The conjunction of circumstance and talent that brings forth such work does not happen every day. In American history, indeed, scarcely half a dozen genuine examples come to mind; more if we include work whose fame falls mainly within a subfield, as, for example, David Montgomery's essay "Workers' Control in America" (1976) in the subfield of labor history. What characterizes this work is not so much that it is better history by the normal canons of evaluation but that it somehow surmounts those canons and is received as a kind of historical revelation. Maybe the right term here is *charismatic* history.

Charismatic history, however, tends to have a finite life, and when the profession turns critical, it does so with a vengeance. In *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, OK, 1991), for example, Richard White never uses the word "frontier" and Turner himself is simply expunged; he does not even appear in White's bibliography. David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991) belongs in, or at any rate approaches near, the charmed circle of charismatic history. But unlike Turner, Roediger is not being given much time to savor his triumph. What we are witnessing in this symposium, I would

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submit, is Eric Arnesen's precocious effort to run this latest instance of charismatic history to ground.

From the foregoing, it will be evident that I am sympathetic to Arnesen's project; no historical work should be exempt from critical scrutiny. But in two respects I think Arnesen needs emending. In his zeal to reveal Roediger's flaws, to begin with, Arnesen does not adequately credit Roediger for his achievement. *Wages of Whiteness* arrived at a ripe moment in the new labor historiography. There was a palpable restiveness with the celebratory bent of the pioneering generation. In particular, the question of race needed addressing. If anyone needed reminding, there was Herbert Hill, hammering away at the field's lamented icon, Herbert Gutman. The rise of the republican school, moreover, barred the usual evasions. Socialists might blame the system, but who could blame the Declaration of Independence? If republicanism was the keystone of nineteenth-century class formation, then working-class racism had to be an act of will, of human agency. *Wages of Whiteness* is brilliantly responsive to these intellectual currents. If readers find in it an expansive meaning, as history the book itself was entirely an entry in the debates over the labor history of the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. In this, *Wages of Whiteness* seems to be representative of charismatic history generally. All the examples I can think of arose in specific historiographical contexts and addressed issues that people were already thinking about.

Wages of Whiteness was not, however, the first book on the scene. Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990) was already there, in the same Verso series, in fact, with an identical spine, but twice as thick. This was because Saxton took a more expansive approach to the paradox of racism in a republican society, implicating in his view the nation's entire political regime. One might have thought this would work to Saxton's advantage, but the ambitiousness of his enterprise actually muffled the central theme. Saxton defined it, moreover, in narrowly functional terms: How did a republic justify to itself slavery and dispossession of the native Americans? Two targets, in turn, made for further diffuseness. The phrase *white republic* had a promising ring, but in Saxton's hands it became lost in the byways of party history and cultural development. Saxton's is a rich and interesting book, but it is not charismatic history. It seems that being there at the right time and addressing the right issues are not enough. You have to do it the right way.

Roediger did it the right way. He knows a single truth—that working-class formation in America is entangled in white racial identity—and every resource at his disposal is mobilized to advance that truth. Few books achieve the focus of *Wages of Whiteness*—or the economy. Roediger rests his case on only three pillars—the language of class, the psychohistory of blackface, and the conflation of race/racism and (Irish-American) ethnicity—but none could be more in tune with the current temper of our scholarship. In W. E. B. Du Bois, Roediger allies himself with the most revered figure in the field (a connection that Arnesen, shrewdly, goes out of his way to challenge). And *Wages of Whiteness* is infused

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with the moral energy of one bearing personal witness—which is how Roediger opens his book—to his conversion from the racism of Cairo, Illinois. Best of all is *whiteness,* which, like Turner's frontier, in a single word encapsulates everything that readers find compelling in *Wages of Whiteness.* Bravo.

It was, of course, not true that readers were so dazzled that they could not be critical of Roediger's argument. In my own review of the book, for example, I questioned whether the crisis of industrial discipline on which Roediger's psychohistory turned was empirically demonstrable; whether his key mechanism, projection, could be treated in class-specific terms; how the fact that Irish-American workers became Democrats could be squared with the book's class-formation thesis; and why, if emancipation did so little to reverse whiteness, slavery could have been so instrumental in the production of working-class racism. "However much one might be inclined to take issue with Roediger on these matters," I concluded, "there is no denying the enormous achievement of his book. Henceforth, there will be no evading the question of racism in our contemplation of working-class formation in America."[1] Although Arnesen's critique adds much that I hadn't thought of, I stand by what I wrote. To put it differently, would the field be better off without *Wages of Whiteness?*

The one reason to think so touches on my second reservation to Arnesen's critique, namely, that it does not distinguish clearly enough between *Wages of Whiteness* and what followed. If the final attribute of charismatic history is a capacity for generating a flood of emulators, in this respect Roediger's book qualifies hands down. Almost overnight, whiteness was hot in fields utterly remote from labor history. It seems remarkable, in fact, that a book so specific in its reference, in a field of so little intrinsic interest to them, should have provoked a stampede among people in communications, media studies, rhetoric and the like. I recall an account in *The New York Times* about an interdisciplinary conference on whiteness a few years later in which one of the graduate student organizers, a Berkeley literature student, is quoted to the effect that whiteness was the kind of idea on which a career might be built. The response among historians is surely (as one might have expected) more tempered, but would it be too cynical to suggest even here a consideration not so distant from that graduate student's? If, as I proposed at the outset, the bane of the writing historian is not to be read, then embracing whiteness seems a good bet, at least if one accepts the anecdotal evidence of my own experience. Every book I needed for this symposium (save Roediger's own collection *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* [New York, 1994], which, inexplicably, was in library storage) was either out or on reserve, and I fared no better at the bookstore. We know how far things have gone from a recent notice that Hitotsubatshi University, Tokyo, is seeking a visiting Americanist in, among other topics, "whiteness studies."[2]

No thrust of Arnesen's seems to me more telling than that whiteness is a "moving target," a concept of endless plasticity. For this, we have Roediger's emulators to thank. In *Wages of Whiteness,* the concept is specific, rooted in the

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book's argument. Roediger might (as I will argue) have been more attentive to the language of whiteness, but that was his prerogative. After all, as its creator, whiteness was his to deploy as he saw fit. In a sense, moreover, the entire book is a work about meaning, in that it is devoted to explaining how Roediger arrived at whiteness as agent in an emerging (white) working class's struggle to define itself. For his followers, however, whiteness is already there, and they, as its appropriators, are the authors of Arnesen's litany of meanings: "a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for 'white supremacy,' an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial 'others' and oneself that can be rejected through 'treason' to a racial category." What is astonishing is how effortlessly these multiple meanings blossomed, even in the best of the whiteness books, in cavalier disregard for its specific usage in *Wages of Whiteness* or, indeed, even for how arguments arising from these redefinitions of whiteness squared with that foundational book.

A like distinction needs to be drawn on the fraught question of "becoming white." That proposition unquestionably originates in *Wages of Whiteness.* Roediger opens his chapter on the Irish with a catalogue of derogatory barbs by Americans against the arriving immigrants, including "racial comparisons . . . not infrequently flattering" to blacks. "In short," concludes, Roediger, "it was by no means clear that the Irish were white" (134). Roediger does not actually commit himself beyond that point (although the chapter is indeed sprinkled with statements about the Irish becoming white). Nor need he do so, since the main thrust of his chapter is that the Irish were the agents of their own fate. They had quite enough motive to embrace white supremacy, whether their despised condition meant being regarded as nonwhite or not. But what is suggestive in *Wages of Whiteness* becomes hard fact in the books and articles that followed, so that our immigration history seems on its way to being recast in the mold of "becoming white." And when the fact becomes hard enough, it can be turned on its head, as Neil Foley does by arguing in *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 1997) that the economic decline of Texas tenant farmers meant the "waning" of their whiteness and their relegation to the despised status of the "offwhite." I entirely approve of Arnesen's demolition of this whiteness scholarship, or, more accurately, of the whiteness claims superimposed on scholarship sometimes empirically rich, as *White Scourge* is, or even, as with Matthew Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), otherwise keenly argued and stimulating. Roediger planted an interesting but unsustainable idea. It should have been allowed to die a natural death. Instead it became a monster.

At one point in his otherwise relentless assault, Arnesen relents a bit. There is, he concedes, something to the language of whiteness. What did it mean when an investigator was told—to take a much-worn instance—that blast furnace jobs were for Hunkies, not white men? Researchers in our field must have encounters of this kind all the time, as, in my case, while doing a brief essay about John

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McLuckie, the mayor of Homestead during the great 1892 strike. This is what he said at a rally just before the strike:

> It is Sunday morning, and we ought to be in church, but we are here to-day [sic] to see if we are to live as white men in the future. The constitution of this country guarantees all men the right to live, but in order to live we must keep up a continuous struggle.

And afterward, down on his luck in Mexico, McLuckie exclaimed, on learning that Andrew Carnegie had been behind an offer of money: "Well, that was damned white of Andy, wasn't it?"[3] McLuckie was an exemplary battler for social justice—my entry, in fact, in a book about "forgotten heroes"—and no bigot; he had, among other things, just toppled the local nativist party from power in Homestead before the strike. Yet clearly "whiteness" in some ways infused his worldview. It would have rescued me, after placing an asterisk next to "white men" in McLuckie's speech, to have had by my side some smart historian's analysis to guide me past my own clumsy explanation.

One might have expected to find this in *Wages of Whiteness,* but for all its attention to the language of class, the book is notably silent about the language of whiteness. No doubt, in his quest for charismatic history, Roediger had his reasons. It is not too late, however, for him to remedy this deficiency. Nor is there really any mystery about what needs doing. We want a survey of the usages of "white" by American workers, with rigorous analysis of meanings, contexts, and changes over time. Whiteness—Roediger's word, remember, and not to be found, in the sense he gives it, in any dictionary, at least not yet—then describes this particular realm, and no other. Scholars looking for a quick fix would have to go elsewhere. And Roediger would have his riposte to Arnesen's suggestion that whiteness is a concept that lacks "utility" and should be retired "for more precise historical categories and analytical tools."

NOTES

1. David Brody, review of Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24 (1993):380.
2. *Organization of American Historians Newsletter,* November 2000, page 21.
3. David Brody, "John McLuckie: Burgess of Homestead," in *Forgotten Heroes,* ed. Susan Ware (New York, 1998), 146–47, 151.

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