

Roediger, David (2017) *Class, Race, and Marxism*, Verso, London, UK, and New York, NY.

Review by Gary Jones

It should come as no surprise that *Class, Race, and Marxism*, by David R. Roediger, the Foundation Distinguished Professor of American Studies and History at Kansas University, was the co-recipient of the *C.L.R. James Award for the Best Book for an Academic or General Audience* in 2018. With his customary knowledge and insight Roediger discusses the intersection of class, race, and solidarity, an issue of great importance to all those concerned about the American working class, including those involved in the field of Working-Class Studies.

Roediger, a past president of both the American Studies Association and the Working-Class Studies Association, is the author of numerous influential books and scholarly articles such as *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) and 'Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the New Immigrant Working Class' co-authored with historian James R. Barrett and first published in *The Journal of American Ethnic History* (1997).

His most recent work, *Class, Race, and Marxism*, is a collection of six articles published between 2006 and 2016 together with a new introduction. Roediger's introduction offers a judicious survey of the recent debate over class and race in the U.S. including the contentious question as to whether the 'production of difference' is part of the 'essence of capital.' Drawing on the theoretical work of scholars such as Lisa Lowe and Michael Lebowitz, Roediger not only answers in the affirmative, but in an argument of central importance to understanding class, race, and solidarity, states that capitalism 'sought, exploited and needed, and created difference.' (26)

The book itself is divided into two parts. Part One, 'Interventions: Making Sense of Race and Class,' contains three articles that discuss the debate over race and class in the contemporary U.S. The first, from 2006, discusses what Roediger termed the 'retreat from race and class.' The second article, from 2011, discusses the often-overlooked Marxist backgrounds of the scholars most prominent in both the origins and later emergence of the critical study of whiteness during the 1990s, including Roediger himself. The third article in Part One, from 2010, discusses the scholarship and activism of the late George Rawick, a 'white intellectual' among 'thinking black intellectuals,' an important mentor of the author's.

Part Two, 'Histories: The Past and Present of Race and Class,' contains the final three articles in the collection that discuss race and class in U.S. history. The first article, from 2011, co-written with Elizabeth Esch, discusses the production and use of racial difference to successfully remove

Indians from the land, manage slaves, and justify slavery from colonial settlement to the mid-1800s. The second article, from 2009, discusses how capitalist managers since the late-1800s continued to produce and use racial difference to manage the labor of their (waged) workers. In the third and final article in Part Two, from 2016, Roediger discusses the ‘checkered’ origins and use of the term solidarity. On solidarity itself he emphasizes ‘how precious, but also how understandably fragile, broad solidarities are among groups who are oppressed but oppressed in very different and divisive ways.’ (29)

Overall, Roediger persuasively argues that capital has been far more adept at producing racial difference and using it to divide workers than the Left has been at building solidarity. This is likely because, as others have suggested elsewhere, while the U.S. Left has clearly recognized black people as workers, it has not as clearly recognized the different experiences of black people due to racism, and the need to develop policies to address that experience. As a result, black workers have tended to join organizations other than those of the Left. Nevertheless, Roediger’s analysis strongly suggests that although difficult, solidarity is possible.

In sum, this book deserves a wide audience. Careful reading of *Class, Race, and Marxism* could provide scholars and activists with an opportunity to rethink their approaches to class and race in their respective studies and struggles. If so, this book could ultimately make a valuable contribution to the collective building of working-class solidarity.

Reviewer Bio

Gary Jones is Associate Professor of History at American International College, Springfield, Massachusetts. Most recently he participated in ‘Conflict in the Coalfields: A Roundtable on Strikes and Mine Wars in Early 20th Century Pennsylvania and West Virginia,’ 38th Annual North American Labor History Conference, October 20-22, 2016, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.