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Race, Class and Roediger's Open Marxism

by Satnam Virdee



The early 1990s was a desperately inhospitable moment for critical thought and political practice. The antisystemic cycle of protest comprising worker struggles and movements against racism and sexism had drawn to a close: comprehensively defeated through a combination of state repression and partial incorporation. And accompanying this collapse of the social movements was a crisis in socialism, particularly Marxism. In the immediate wake of these developments, Stuart Hall noted the curious emergence of the Post-Marxist intellectual – someone who had supposedly settled their accounts with the tradition and moved on but who continued to utilise Marxist concepts only to demonstrate their inadequacy: ‘had Marxism not existed’ he said, ‘Post-Marxists would have had to invent it,’ in order to give them ‘something further to do.’

And this same figure was also to be found in the field of racism studies as Post-Marxism and its close relative poststructuralism came to prevail over Marxism, with disastrous results. Quickly gone from the field were sustained accounts of racism's articulation to class and the historical evolution of capitalism in the age of globalism. Reflecting the altered state of affairs was the almost wholesale abandonment of the workplace and its institutions as a legitimate site of study to investigate how racism worked. With it, of course, disappeared the workers – black, brown and white. It was in this juncture that I first encountered David Roediger's influential *Wages of Whiteness*, and subsequently that body of work known as critical whiteness studies. While many at the time, and subsequently, have attempted to position critical whiteness studies firmly within poststructuralism, Roediger himself understood it very much as a 'historical materialist project.' Certainly, for me, Roediger was one of those key figures (others included Ambalavanar Sivanandan, Stuart Hall and Robert Miles) who helped intellectually push back against a growing body of race scholarship and their invocation of Richard Wright's claim that Marxism was 'but a transitory makeshift pending a more accurate diagnosis'. Instead, Roediger's studies of the American working class demonstrated empirically the potentiality of the returns of thinking race and class together within an open historical materialist frame, one which refused orthodoxy and ossification and instead took seriously Rosa Luxemburg's insistence that Marxism was first and foremost a 'revolutionary worldview' that must 'always struggle for new revelations.'

Thinking the politics of race and class together

In *Class, Race and Marxism* (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/2467-class-race-and-marxism>), Roediger offers a compelling analysis of the disorientating effects of living in the slipstream of the historic defeat of the class and racial justice movements. Yet if the 1990s saw growing numbers of anti-racist activists and scholars disengaging from class analysis and political practice as socialism became increasingly stigmatised, the past decade has witnessed a doubling down on this separation but now from the other end with advocates of class-based politics tending to subsume questions of racism and anti-racism to class. As Roediger notes 'the idea of a colourless struggle for human progress is unfortunately back with a vengeance' but 'what is distressingly new, or at least resurgent, is the extent to which indictments of anti-racism, and even of the use of race as a concept, come now from liberalism *and* from the left.' From Bernie Sanders, and his insistence that class is more important than race, to Adolph Reed's understanding of identity politics as the 'left-wing of neoliberalism', one of the defining characteristics of large parts of the US left is its inability to think race and class together. In fact, it is almost as if so-called identity politics (for which read anti-racism in this instance) are wholly responsible for the failure of class politics to secure a wider audience.

The increasingly intemperate tone of this debate was brought to light when the celebrated author Ta-Nehisi Coates asked the Sanders campaign why universal strategies for combating inequality were not married to those that focused specifically on combating racial disadvantage. The response from parts of the left was not to engage with this question, but to accuse Coates of being an agent of the US state and purveying a 'right-wing fantasy'. Now there may well be a certain kind of corporate 'identity politics' whose ambitions stretch no further than the promise to ethnically diversify the capitalist elite, but Roediger is surely right when he insists on the need to find more nuanced ways to distinguish between those projects and others like Black Lives Matter whose programmatic statements demand nothing less than full economic and social equality through the immediate combating of the suffocating force of racism and class disadvantage. Otherwise, according to Roediger, the danger is we 'read out of existence the whole strand of fighters like CLR James, Claudia Jones, and Dr. King, all of whom very much believed in universal projects and anti-racist demands.'

In fact, one way of making sense of anti-racist 'identity politics' would be to think of them as a necessary response to the long-standing racialization of class politics. One of the most important contributions of critical whiteness studies was to lay bare how, right from the moment of its inception, the category of working class became entangled with questions of race. To understand oneself as working class was simultaneously to recognise yourself as white in relational opposition to the African American, and sometimes other 'non-white' social groups. In the hands of Roediger (as well as others like Alexander Saxton, Theodore W. Allen and Noel Ignatiev), race could no longer be understood as simply a thinly constructed mask of false ideas or beliefs, but rather a sort of unquestioning imaginary that represented the real world, and 'through which individuals come to live in an imaginary way, their relation to the real, material conditions of their existence', as Stuart Hall once put it.

And what we have seen over the course of the history of capitalism, not just in the US but the West more generally, is the tendency for this racialization of class politics to be consolidated over and over again. The outcome has been nothing less than a tragedy for emancipatory politics because race, more often than not, becomes 'the modality through which class is lived, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and fought through' (Stuart Hall). Why do we consistently refuse to understand such long-standing developments as a form of (racist) identity politics enveloped in the universalist category of class?

It is this on-going process of the racialization of class politics (as well as its articulation to nationalism) that the likes of Sanders and Reed seem unable to grasp when they too easily oppose 'identity politics'. Race-blind class politics will simply not do. Or as Angela Davis once said: 'in a racist society, it is not enough to be nonracist—we must be anti-racist.' Unless class politics are combined with explicit anti-racist demands one risks leaving untouched the injustices of historic and contemporaneous racisms, or, as Roediger puts it, 'race and class demands...do not exist in a zero-sum relationship. Increased boldness in class demands is not gained...by hitting the mute button where race talk is concerned.'

And of course, this explains why, anti-racist 'identity politics' have remained a necessary feature throughout US history – be it the self-organised black slave revolts of the 18th and 19th centuries or the collective action mounted by the two wings of the American racial justice movement over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Significantly, according to Roediger, the political returns aren't just limited to the more effective tackling of racism: 'The expanding horizons created by the movements against racial oppression made all workers think more sharply about new tactics, new possibilities, and new freedoms' such that it would be better to understand racial justice struggles as 'sites of learning for white workers, of self-activity by workers of colour, and of placing limits on capital's ability to divide workers'.

I agree. In my book, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* I found it was racialized outsiders – Irish Catholic, Jewish, Asian, African and Caribbean depending on the historical juncture – who helped universalize the militant, yet often particularistic, fights of the working class in Britain precisely because they were better able to see through the fog of blood, soil and belonging and move their claims onto a more internationalist terrain. Because of this capacity for second sight, these racialized outsiders were the linchpin, the catalytic agent that helped align struggles against racism with those against class exploitation leading to a process of multi-ethnic class formation, and the greater democratisation of British society.

And long before Roediger and I there was a certain CLR James who recognised the emancipatory potential of the racialized outsider, referring to African Americans within the heart of the emergent global hegemon as the 'vanguard of the revolution'. Because of their racialized experiences under first slavery and then Jim Crow, James claimed African Americans were not 'deceived by democracy', and there is:

...no soil from which illusions about bourgeois democracy can flourish. The [African Americans] have no need to dream dreams and see visions of a new society. It is always before them to be able to live as white America lives. But that desire, modest as it is, they will never get under capitalism.

For James then, the struggle against racism was by definition a struggle against capitalism, and therefore a 'constituent part of the struggle for socialism'. To put it in a different way to James, if we are to ever forge a sustainable solidarity between the ethnically diverse proletariat in the imperialist core (as well as with those beyond), it is more than likely we will have to go through race, rather than around it. The path to socialism will be more labyrinthine than most historical materialists have envisioned.

Is race internal to the logic of capital?

Thus far, I have focused on Roediger's engaging discussion focusing on theorizing the politics of racism and anti-racism and their articulation to class. Partly overlapping this thematic is his extended critical engagement with David Harvey's contentious claim that race is a kind of externality and not a constitutive component of the internal logic of capital. Harvey appears to sustain such an argument by drawing a rather absolutist distinction between historical capitalism as a social formation, which he concedes is entangled with racism, and capital, whose logic can be examined without any need to factor in racism (or gender for that matter).

Drawing imaginatively on the theoretical work of Lisa Lowe and Michael Lebowitz in particular, Roediger comes to forcefully reject Harvey's position. Lowe has claimed for some time now that 'Marxism has not fully accounted for race in the making of capitalism' in part because of its refusal to recognise that 'capital has maximised its profits not through rendering labour abstract but precisely through the social production of difference marked by race, nation, geographical origins and gender.' Roediger brings this important insight into productive dialogue with Lebowitz's claim that Marx ignored the 'x factor', the drive to divide workers which Lebowitz understands as inherent to the essence of capital. Or to put it another way, 'capital encourages the development of the collective worker in itself, but has no interest in the emergence of the collective worker for itself.'

In a series of fascinating historical case studies, Roediger counters Harvey's claim by drawing our attention to the centrality of the structuring force of racism to the logic of capital. In the first instance, he shows how the management of slaves was intimately bound up with discourses of land management such that 'even as the North and South gradually parted company on the justifiability of slavery, planters benefitted from a broadly shared acceptance of settler colonialism.' Or, as he puts it more bluntly elsewhere: '[e]nslaving Africans was on this view the nurturant flip side of the white managerial genius that killed off Indians.' In a second case study, Roediger traces the centrality of race to the rational logic of advanced capitalism where 'systems of modern management and race management coexisted cheek by jowl' with different groups of racialized workers being pitted against one another in the same workplaces. And crucially, such intersecting knowledges and practices were central to imperialist expansion as Roediger's example of the US mining engineer so powerfully demonstrates.

One can infer important analytic returns from such historical examples. In particular, the move to think of anti-black and anti-Indian racisms relationally when making sense of the production of whiteness very much helps shift critical whiteness studies beyond its primary focus on the black-white racial dualism. At the same time, more work needs to be done in this regard as Roediger himself acknowledges with his insistent call to make 'non-white immigrant labour' more central to studies of whiteness. Roediger's argument that capitalism 'sought, exploited and needed, and created difference' could also be further developed through a shift of our focus beyond the boundaries of the US nation-state and towards a more thorough-going engagement with those ideological and material processes that led to the racialization of the modern world-system.

Mainstream Marxism and its racial blindspot

The preceding discussion brings me neatly to the presentation of a final set of thoughts, some of which might have some readers of *Salvage* and *Verso* shuffling rather uncomfortably in their armchairs. First, how can it come to pass that two white Marxists – both of whom came to political consciousness in the US (Harvey is an English immigrant) amid the last sustained cycle of antisystemic collective action and, normatively, committed to overcoming racism – arrive at such diametrically opposed conclusions about the relationship between racism and the internal logic of capital?

Clues can be gleaned from Roediger's evocative account tracing the genealogy of his intellectual and political development. We find him swimming in that 1960s cycle of protest – active participation in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the anti-Nazi Chicago organisation, *Red Rose*, are interwoven with encounters with Black Power politics and women's liberation. It was here he claims that 'the permeability of race and class emerged in sharp relief. The expanding horizons created by the movements against racial oppression made all workers think more sharply about new tactics, new possibilities, and new freedoms.' Roediger also helpfully recovers for posterity the hidden history of critical whiteness studies. The early 1990s may have marked its institutionalisation in the academy, but its originary moment lay significantly earlier among 'those for whom whiteness has been a problem' and 'who had long studied white identities and practices as problems needing to be historicised, analysed and theorized and countered.' I very much appreciated this acknowledgement of the debt owed to 'thinking black intellectuals' who helped Roediger and others to 'find their voices.'

Unfortunately, no comparable and sustained critical engagement with the body of work produced by mainly Marxists of colour on race, class and capital(ism) can be found in David Harvey's *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. How then can we take seriously the forthright claims he makes about racism and the logic of capital when he fails to even demonstrate an awareness of a key body of relevant scholarship focusing on the underside of capitalist modernity (settler colonialism, racial slavery, Jim Crow, imperialism, uneven development and international migration, racism and anti-racism)? And further, why does it take a white Marxist to bring such scholarship into dialogue with Harvey's claims? Does mainstream Marxism and its audience have its own racial blindspot?

In conclusion, I recommend unequivocally Roediger's survey of the state of race and class in Marxist thought today as well as his powerfully-made argument that racism is not only part of the history of capitalism but also the logic of capital. I also hope his book encourages readers to go and discover for themselves that intellectually vibrant and on-going body of anti-racist Marxist scholarship which informed and helped sustain Roediger's open Marxism. Only by actively bringing such scholarship in from the cold, from the margins of Marxism to its very centre, will historical materialism be able to speak more effectively to the pressing concerns that confront us in the opening decades of the 21st century, and to those subaltern publics who might one day become our pathfinders of the internationalist road to socialism.

This is the first in the series of articles analysing David Roediger's contribution to Marxist scholarship and his new book *Class, Race and Marxism*. (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/2467-class-race-and-marxism>)

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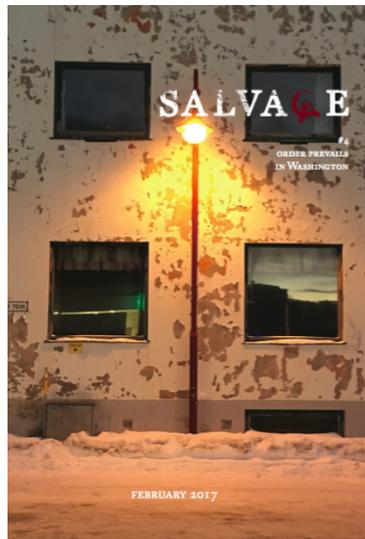
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