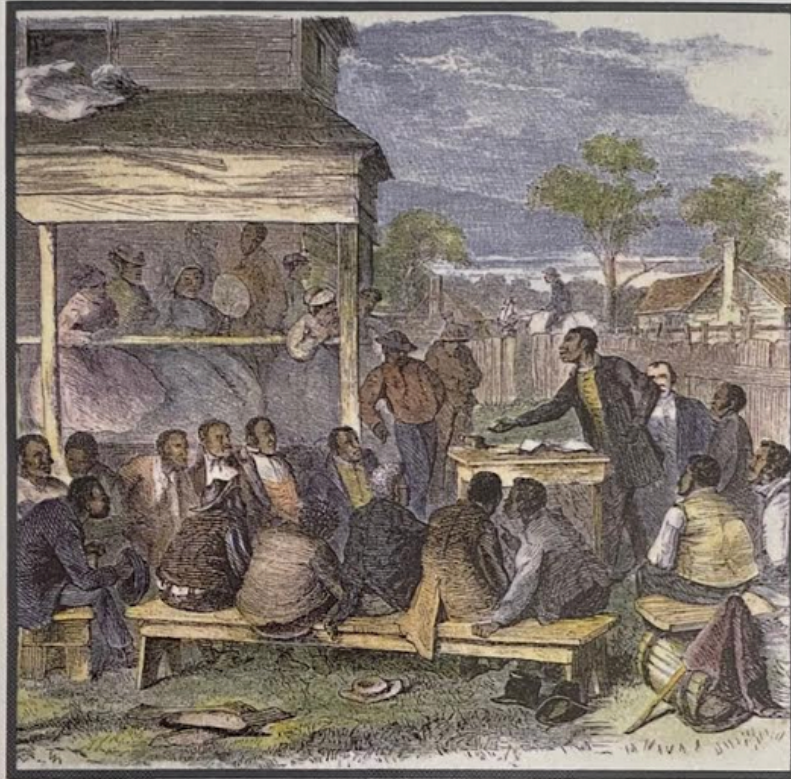


W.E.B. Du Bois
Black Reconstruction, pages 700-701. (Published 1935)

W. E. B. DU BOIS



B L A C K
RECONSTRUCTION
IN AMERICA 1860-1880

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID LEVERING LEWIS

The political success of the doctrine of racial separation, which overthrew Reconstruction by uniting the planter and the poor white, was far exceeded by its astonishing economic results. The theory of laboring class unity rests upon the assumption that laborers, despite internal jealousies, will unite because of their opposition to exploitation by the capitalists. According to this, even after a part of the poor white laboring class became identified with the planters, and eventually displaced them, their interests would be diametrically opposed to those of the mass of white labor, and of course to those of the black laborers. This would throw white and black labor into one class, and precipitate a united fight for higher wage and better working conditions.

Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South, and it failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while

this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.

On the other hand, in the same way, the Negro was subject to public insult; was afraid of mobs; was liable to the jibes of children and the unreasoning fears of white women; and was compelled almost continuously to submit to various badges of inferiority. The result of this was that the wages of both classes could be kept low, the whites fearing to be supplanted by Negro labor, the Negroes always being threatened by the substitution of white labor.

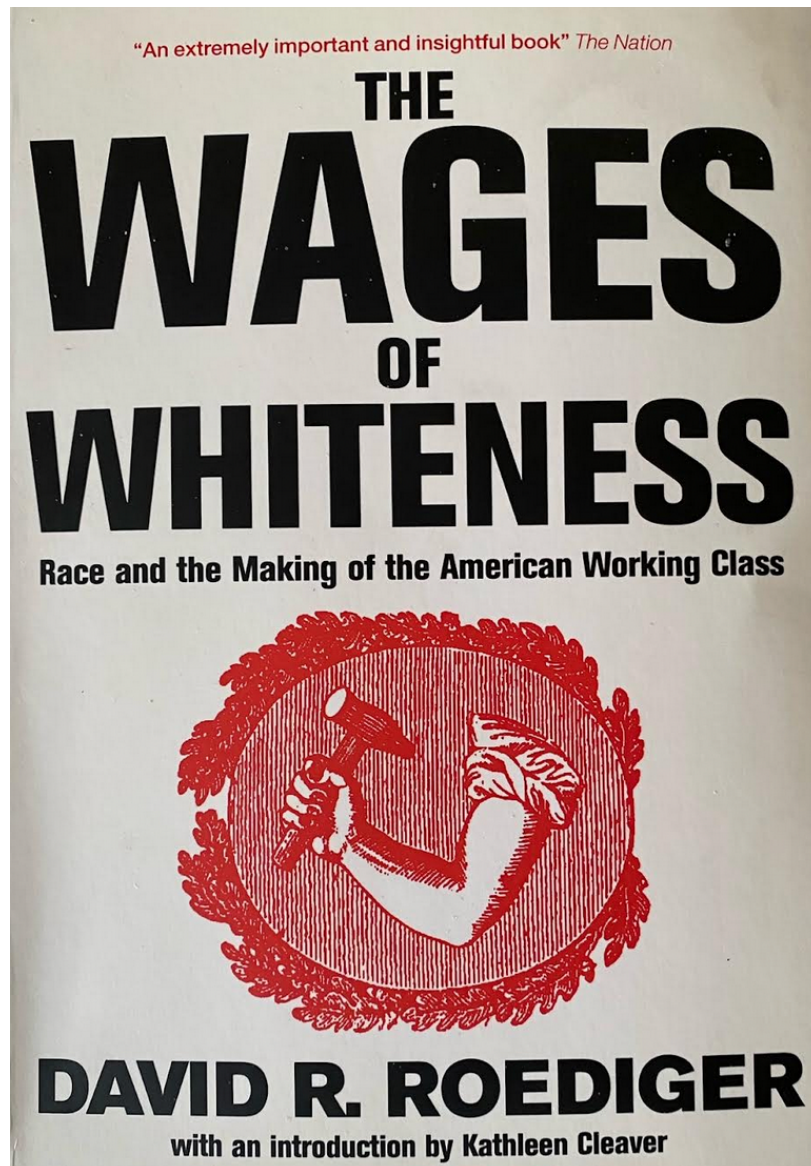
Mob violence and lynching were the inevitable result of the attitude of these two classes and for a time were a sort of permissible Roman holiday for the entertainment of vicious whites. One can see for these reasons why labor organizers and labor agitators made such small headway in the South. They were, for the most part, appealing to laborers who would rather have low wages upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage. White labor saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives, so that in many districts Negroes were afraid to build decent homes or dress well, or own carriages, bicycles or automobiles, because of possible retaliation on the part of the whites.

Thus every problem of labor advance in the South was skillfully turned by demagogues into a matter of inter-racial jealousy. Perhaps the most conspicuous proof of this was the Atlanta riot in 1906, which followed Hoke Smith's vicious attempt to become United States Senator on a platform which first attacked corporations and then was suddenly twisted into scandalous traducing of the Negro race.

The sophisticated reader of the white

David Roediger

The Wages of Whiteness, pages 11-13. (Published 1991).



The Essential Du Bois

The analysis offered in the preceding section suggests that, at least in the US, the most pressing task for historians of race and class is not to draw precise lines separating race and class but to draw lines connecting race and class. We can get this attention to how race and class interpenetrate from several sources – for example, in the best of Stuart Hall’s and Alexander Saxton’s works, and to an extent in recent studies of ‘racial formation’²⁰ – but no body of thought rivals that of W.E.B. Du Bois for an understanding of the dynamics, indeed dialectics, of race and class in

the US. Du Bois wrote as a Marxist but also brought additional perspectives to the study of race and class. He was within the broad Black nationalist tradition that Sterling Stuckey has so well portrayed, and from that tradition gained a perspective intelligently critical of oversimplified class analysis.²¹ He, like Toni Morrison, C.L.R. James, James Baldwin and other acute African-American students of the 'white problem', clearly saw whiteness not as natural but nevertheless as real and as problematic in intellectual, moral and political terms. Finally, Du Bois enjoyed the advantage of a critical appreciation of Max Weber's thought on race and status and an ability to borrow critically from Weber as well as from the Marxist tradition.²²

Thus, Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* continually creates jarring, provocative theoretical images, mixing race and class by design. Black reconstruction is, for Du Bois, the key to the story of 'our [the US] labor movement'. The book is organized around the activities of workers, but those workers function, for Du Bois tragically, within racial categories: the first chapter is entitled 'The Black Worker' and the second 'The White Worker'. White labor does not just receive and resist racist ideas but embraces, adopts and, at times, murderously acts upon those ideas. The problem is not just that the white working class is at critical junctures manipulated into racism, but that it comes to think of itself and its interests as white.²³

Du Bois regards the decision of workers to define themselves by their whiteness as understandable in terms of short-term advantages. In some times and places, he argues, such advantages showed up in pay packets, where the wages of white, native-born skilled workers were high, both compared with those of Blacks and by world standards.²⁴ But vital for the white workers Du Bois studied most closely was, as he puts it in a brilliant, indispensable formulation, that even when they 'received a low wage [they were] compensated in part by a ... public and psychological wage.' Here Du Bois not only emphasizes status but the extent to which status was bound up with real social gains. He continues:

They were given public deference ... because they were white. They were admitted freely, with all classes of white people, to public functions [and] public parks. ... The police were drawn from their ranks and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with leniency. ... Their votes selected public officials and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment. ... White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and cost anywhere from twice to ten times colored schools.²⁵

As important as the specifics are here, still more important is the idea that the pleasures of whiteness could function as a 'wage' for white workers. That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as 'not slaves' and as 'not Blacks'.

When they did so, Du Bois argued, the wages of whiteness often turned out to be spurious. America's 'Supreme Adventure ... for that human freedom which would release the human spirit from lower lust for mere meat, and set it free to dream and sing' gave way to a racism that caused 'capitalism [to be] adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor' and that 'ruined democracy'. Race feeling and the benefits conferred by whiteness made white Southern workers forget their 'practically identical interests' with the Black poor and accept stunted lives for themselves and for those more oppressed than themselves.²⁶

Du Bois argued that white supremacy undermined not just working class unity but the very *vision* of many white workers. He connected racism among whites with a disdain for hard work itself, a seeking of satisfaction off the job and a desire to evade rather than confront exploitation. Du Bois held that this would have been a better and more class-conscious nation and world had the heritage of slavery and racism not led the working class to prize whiteness.²⁷ Although these are positions that some neo-Marxists and post-Marxists have criticized as essentialist, they nonetheless seem to me a model that takes us a long step toward seeing the whiteness of the white worker in the broad context of class formation rather than in the narrow confines of job competition.²⁸ Likewise, the tone here strives to emulate that of *Black Reconstruction*, and thus to be more tragic than angry.