

Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Labor Competition

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In this essay, I compare post-Marxian pluralist discussions of racism with a Marxian social control perspective. I will proceed by examining contrasting accounts of the "labor competition" explanation of white working-class racism offered by David Roediger, Ted Allen, and labor historian Alexander Saxton.¹ I show how the category of relative autonomy is engendered by post-Marxists as a response to an economic-determinist reduction of the concept of class rule to "the economy," a reduction for which "orthodox Marxists" are in large part responsible. On the post-Marxian view, culture, politics and ideology are split off ("reified") from class and redefined as relatively autonomous or autonomous causal categories in their own right. I argue that the relative autonomy of "race," for example, is accounted for in psychoanalytic terms. After offering a brief critique of the psychoanalysis of "race," I then show the many difficulties involved in trying to employ it in historical explanation.²

In showing the superiority of a sophisticated class analysis of racism offered by historians like Ted Allen and Alexander Saxton (in his later work) over the presumably more complex analysis of white racism offered by labor historian David Roediger, I focus on precisely those historical examples of egregious white working-class racism which seem best to make the case for the autonomy of "race": the Draft Riots of 1863 and anti-Asian racism in California and the West, which culminated in the various exclusion acts of the 1880's and early 1900's.

Both Allen and Roediger take the making of the white working class seriously, neither denying the murderousness often accompanying the construction of whiteness. Both focus on the process--in Allen's words, "the sea change"--by which the despised Irish became white racists.³ Both reject the labor competition hypothesis--that competition is the cause of white working-class racism against black people. Roediger associates labor competition with the "simply economic," which in turn becomes equated with Marxian class analysis. The labor competition hypothesis (and by extension class analysis) is insufficient and thus requires supplements: psychoanalysis and discourse theory, both of which underlie Roediger's insistence on the autonomy and irreducibility of race.

Roediger notes that in the early nineteenth century blacks and Irish were often described in nearly identical terms, and that it was by no means clear that the Irish were "white."⁴ In the aftermath of mass emigration, the Irish did not turn their shared oppression into solidarity with blacks but instead "treasured their whiteness as entitling them to both political rights and to jobs" (*Wages*, 136). The Irish played central roles in anti-Negro mobs and later in anti-Chinese racism in California. Roediger goes on:

The success of the Irish in being recognized as white resulted largely from the political power of Irish and immigrant voters. The imperative to define themselves as white came but from the particular public and psychological wages whiteness offered to a desperate rural and often pre-industrial population coming to labor in industrializing American cities. (*Wages*, 137)

Despite Roediger's thesis that shared oppression neither of necessity generates solidarity nor of necessity breeds contempt, Roediger states that "their [the Irish] numbers afforded them the political possibility to become white" and "the desperate nature of their labor and their longings *ensured* that they would embrace that possibility to the fullest" (*Wages*, 139; my emphasis).

On the issue of labor competition as the key to Irish-American racism, Roediger notes that it is a non sequiter to go from the fact of black-Irish clashes over jobs to "the proposition that Irish racism was really a cover for job competition." This is an "economic determinist argument . . . that cuts off important parts of the past." Why did the Irish not turn on their far more numerous "white" competitors--German immigrants, Protestants: "why was the animus against working with blacks so much more intense than that against working with Germans?" In noting the fear among Irish of an "amalgamation of labor," Roediger wonders why many historians "hearken to their emphasis on labor and not to their emphasis on amalgamation?" (*Wages*, 147)

The implied answer to this question is that economic determinism screens race out--all the more reason to stress its irreducibility. As we see in his discussion of the New York Draft Riots of 1863, Roediger ties the irreducibility of race here to psycho-sexual identity crisis. He claims that

an analysis centering on Democratic politics and the struggles to secure and redefine the jobs of Irish-American Catholics provides important explanations for that group's embrace of whiteness. But by itself such an analysis makes the unthinking decision to insist on being white seem altogether too utilitarian. Neither political nor psycho-economic calculations [job redefinition] can quite explain why some Irish-American Catholics would mutilate the corpses of the free blacks they lynched in the 1863 Draft Riots in New York City. Neither can such factors by themselves explain why many other Irish immigrants looked with fascination at these crimes nor why members of the community on subsequent days fought to keep authorities from retrieving the corpses. (*Wages*, 150)

Roediger's reference to "unthinking decision" is a nod to Jordan's psychohistorical explanation of racism in *White Over Black*--where racial slavery derives from, in Jordan's words, "an unthinking decision" rooted in "the general debasement of the negro," which is, in Allen's view, the corollary of a "natural prejudice" (whether instinctual or psychoanalytic, it doesn't much matter)--a deep need to secure "white" identity (see Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, Vol. One, 8-9). This chapter of *Wages* is entitled "Irish-American Workers and White Racial Formation." The concept of racial formation is taken from post-Marxians Omi and Winant. Before proceeding, I wish to assert the complementary role post-Marxian discourse theory and psychoanalysis play in supplementing economic determinist argument--falsely equated with Marxian class analysis. As I will suggest, the combination of psychoanalysis and discourse theory amounts to a compromise formation in which they simultaneously complement and undo each other.⁵

The "psychological wage" of Irish whiteness, Roediger continues, "was sometimes based on rational, if horribly constrained choices," but, he confidently asserts, frequently they were rooted in what Fanon called "'the prelogical thought of the phobic'"--"the fevered thinking of racist projection" (*Wages*, 150). This fever emerges from the guilty and tortured sexuality of the Irish, and a longing for a pre-industrial past, which, in its turn, becomes identified with black people according to the following semiotic chain: pre-industrial equals primitive equals blackness (a chain the obviousness of which Roediger fails to interrogate as much as he should). Blacks then become the target of a violent reaction formation that is presumably behind the feverish "unthinking decision" to lynch and mutilate.

Roediger guts the force of the political/economic/ideological explanation of the riots in order to make the psychosexual view more attractive. Racism is not a cover for labor competition so much as the inverse--labor competition hides the deeper, unthinking, psychosexual matrix. The presence of graphic, grotesque, well-nigh gothic violence facilitates a kind of slippage in Roediger's (and others') explanatory vocabulary reinforcing the turn to depth psychology. Rage, a secondary phenomenon of racism, is turned into a primary phenomenon, the index of its own deep cause. Emotional intensity is split off from political and ideological elements that shape it and make it intelligible,

then attributed to an autonomous psychoanalysis. I would suggest that this is the kind of analysis that roots the holocaust in the mass psychology of the German people, the destruction of Southeast Asia in the psychology of the grunt, the Indonesian government's massacre of the PKI in the unshackled Dionysian energies of Balinese peasants. That racist social structures and racist ideologies are necessarily realized psychologically and often in fanatical, even genocidal, ways does not mean that a libidinally-rooted fanaticism plays a significant causal role in atrocities, racist or otherwise.[6](#)

I hope to show what's wrong with this analysis by looking at Allen's Marxian social control analysis of labor competition and racist rage. Unlike Roediger, Allen repudiates psychoanalytic explanations of white racism as both a-historical and themselves racist. Unlike Roediger, he does not focus on practices of self-formation among the Irish--how the Irish created themselves anew as white. He does not need to deny Irish agency and the murderous practices through which the white working-class self has often been secured. Nevertheless, Allen's objections to labor competition are strikingly similar to Roediger's. Allen, in looking at the population growth of New York City, notes that the foreign born made up more than half the city's population in 1855 and increased by 57,000 in the next five years. As he puts it: "fifteen thousand people a years were settling in the city, more than the total African-American resident population. Such a rate of immigration would, of course, tend to increase 'labor competition.' But why should it have been 'racial'?" There were "four times as many non-Irish foreign-born whites in the labor market as compared to African-Americans."

Accompanying the labor competition case is the view that white working-class racism was a response, however tragic, to the role black workers played as strikebreakers. Allen comments that it does not help the labor competition case to avoid mention of German strikebreakers and other European strikebreakers, not to mention labor competition among the Irish themselves leading to "'many a bloody brawl'" between men from Connaught and men from Cork or Ulster. There were black strikebreakers and white strikebreakers, but "the murderous wrath of the strikers was reserved for those of 'dark skin,' who were pursued by the mob, crying 'drive off the damn niggers' and 'kill the niggers'" (Allen, 192-4).

The purely economic logic is not insignificant--competition is built into wage labor. But it is a precondition for the "racializing" of this competition (and the murderousness associated with it), not an explanation. Like Roediger, Allen sees labor competition as a rationalization for a pre-existing racializing logic. For Allen, however, this racializing logic is a continuation of the logic worked out by the planters of Virginia to divide white and black (or rather to produce whiteness and blackness in order to oppose them). It is not a psycho-logic but a political and ideo-logic devised and continually reinforced by the ruling classes in the service of class rule and capital accumulation. This does not rule out a creative or re-signifying component in the racializing practices of white workers. (That Native Americans took up the Jeffersonian ideal does not deny the main point, that this Jeffersonianism functioned as part of a logic of dispossession.)

Neither the Irish nor other "white laborers" set up the white-supremacist framework of social control. Nor did and does this framework function in their interest.⁷ Understanding the context for the sea change of the Irish from "degraded race" to "white race" requires looking at the practices of the planter bourgeoisie, what Allen calls the proslavery phalanx, composed of three elements. The first is the ideology of the planters themselves, from the positive argument for slavery to the colonization argument whose subtext is that the races could only co-exist on the basis of racial slavery. Allen, like most historians on the question, does not think colonization was seriously considered though it did play an important ideological role in winning white workers to white supremacy. The second component of the phalanx was the alliance with significant sections of the northern bourgeoisie. The third was the link to "laboring class European-Americans," or what he calls "the white worker front" (Allen, 184).

This struggle to wed the European laboring population to the planters was of course an ongoing struggle which began, as Edmund Morgan shows us, well before the nineteenth century. This social control strategy was intended, in Allen's words, "to forestall the emergence of a proletarian front in favor of abolition. The critical element of this political strategy was the defense of the 'white' racial privileges of laboring-class European-Americans against the 'threat' of equalitarianism implicit in abolition. Its basic theoretical principle was an intolerance of the presence of African-Americans as free persons" (Allen, 163). In the nineteenth century, the struggle ranged from the anti-Jacobin rhetoric of our founding fathers in the aftermath of both the Haitian revolution and Gabriel's Rebellion, which was feared to involve a European laboring component (see Egerton, 1993), to the concerted efforts against the Irish abolitionists represented most famously by Daniel O'Connell and the Repeal Association.

The privileges accorded the Irish as part of their initiation into what Allen calls "the intermediate buffer social control stratum" were those accorded previous members of the "white" race: voting, land (more the promise of it), status (the so-called psychological wage), and patronage. As Allen notes, the alliance with the ardently proslavery Tammany Hall was crucial to the whitening of the Irish and carried as its explicit corollary the disfranchising of blacks. Ideology was crucial to this process. As Allen notes, "in order to maintain their dominant position in the national government in the face of a rapidly spreading wage labor system," slave owners increasingly depended on an appeal to white labor. As Henry Clay put it in 1842, "to make the black man free, it would virtually enslave the white man." A year later, preparing his bid for the Presidency, Clay commented:

The great aim should be to arouse the laboring classes in the free States against abolition. Depict the consequences to them of immediate abolition; they [emancipated African Americans] being free would enter into competition with the free laborer; with the American, the Irish, the German; reduce his wages; be confounded with him, and affect his moral and social standing. And as the ultras go for abolition and amalgamation, show that their object is to unite in marriage the laboring white man, and

the laboring black man, and to reduce the white laboring man to the despised and degraded condition of the black man. (Allen, 162-3)

Clay's view, a widespread one among the elite, as Allen shows, is striking confirmation that labor competition is not an explanation of racism but an ideological rationalization for a patently political strategy.

Allen comments that "to assume that it was in the nature of the case that Irish would seek to drive Negroes out, off the job, and do so on the basis of an Irish claim to a 'white' identity, is to assume the Jordan-Degler assumption, that 'white over black' is a memory of the blood" (Allen, 195). Ironically, while Roediger sees psychoanalysis as a supplement to an inadequate economism, represented here by the labor competition argument, Allen suggests rather that the latter presupposes the former, that vulgar economism and psychoanalysis are two sides of the same coin. Psychoanalysis doesn't solve the problem of economism so much as repeat it from a different angle. Roediger adds psychoanalysis and discourse theory to the economic (which he has in turn conflated with a social control hypothesis in fact incompatible with it) in order better to explain white racism. Allen though allows us to see Roediger's solution rather as an amalgamation of bad theories which nonetheless form the peculiar unity of all compromise formations. Economism (labor competition) can't explain racialization without assuming an essentialist psychoanalysis, which in turn explains racialization as an eternal product of the white mind. In our postmodern age, such theories in and of themselves will not wash and are thus compensated for by voluntarist and constructivist discourse theories, which incoherently call upon the so-called explanatory power of essentialism to supplement its negation of explanation in favor of description.

What Roediger calls a psychosexual, pre-logical, phobic component is ideological. The ban on amalgamation, which Roediger locates in the taboo-ridden and tortured Irish Catholic psyche, was part of dividing practices, I repeat, begun well before the period Roediger studies and continually reinforced, a ban called upon in part because of the reality of interracial alliance. When Allen turns his attention from the white proletariat to the whitening of the Irish, Allen focuses on the role of the Democratic party and the Catholic Church hierarchy, who were in league with the Democrats. In his analysis of the draft riots of '63, he focuses on a series of events several years prior to and leading up to the draft riots involving both the Democratic press and the Church.

Allen does not deny the agency of Irish Americans in adopting whiteness and correspondingly repudiating black people but explains that agency through recourse to the ruling-class character and function of key institutions. Roediger interestingly does not deny the force of these institutions, noting that the Democratic party "reinvented whiteness in a manner that refurbished their party's traditional links to the people and offered political democracy and an inclusive patriotism to white male Americans." This white unity or common whiteness functioned to unite "Democratic slaveholders and non-slaveholding whites in the South," connected Southern and Northern wings of the Democracy and "smoothed over" . . . "urban conflicts in Northern cities" (*Wages*, 140).

Roediger says just earlier of both the Catholic Church and the Democratic party that they did not question the whiteness of the Irish. Putting it in this way biases the argument about the construction of whiteness in favor of the Irish proletariat themselves, as if the Irish proletariat first asserted this whiteness and this was not questioned. Yet his citing of Baker belies this: if the Irish reinvented themselves as white, as Roediger rightly argues they did, that's because whiteness had already been reinvented and, with the concerted efforts of the Catholic Church and Tammany Hall, offered to the Irish, who by and large accepted the offer given the absence/danger of alternatives. He, like Allen, notes that the Catholic Church was an ally of the Irish but adds that it was a "protector" and minimizes its role in relation to the Democratic party.[8](#)

Allen, on the other hand, in his analysis of the Catholic Church hierarchy in New York emphasizes not its protective role (protecting the Irish from abolitionists?) but its social control function of promoting the merger of the Irish into the white race, defending slavery and denouncing abolition. Especially striking is Allen's account of Archbishop John Hughes, who, with the help of Tammany newspapers publishing his views, was central in carrying out the social control function. I say striking because Archbishop Hughes came to the U.S. as an Irish immigrant in 1817 or '18. He was then known as John Hughes. As Allen notes, "he had brought memories of mistreatment and humiliations imposed on his father and himself at the hands of good ol' Protestant boys from Ulster, where, as his father saw it, 'a Catholic farmer ranked below a Protestant beggar' in the social scale. He recalled that when his sister died, the priest was forbidden to enter the graveyard to conduct the graveside ceremony" (Allen, 169).

According to Allen, Protestant workers in Ulster, functioning as "the intermediate buffer social control stratum," were accorded racial privileges over the Irish proletariat in accordance with the following "operative principle": "These laboring-class members of the oppressor group are to be shielded against the competition of the members of the oppressed group by the establishment of economically artificial, 'anomalous' privileges--artificial because they subordinate short-term private individual profit to considerations of social control" (Allen, 135). When Hughes came to America, he came to what Allen calls "Ulster Writ Large," where the "racial" divisions between Ulster Protestant and Catholic would be repeated in the division between white and black workers and would serve the same function.[9](#)

When Hughes came over, he was not only prepared to be sympathetic to African-Americans, but in 1825 wrote an abolitionist poem under the name Leander where he pleads to "Columbia" (the United States) to "wipe the stain" of "foul bondage from thy Southern plain" and, "by heaven's decree," "let Afric's sons feel what it is--to be" (Allen, 169). The poem then turns to the first person, the speaker directly identifying with the plight of the African slave. It is Hughes, among others, that Allen has in mind when he states that "no immigrants ever came to the United States better prepared . . . to empathize with African Americans. . . ." (168). Yet soon after the writing of this poem, Hughes entered upon his clerical career and thereafter became "an organization man" for the Catholic Church and the white race. Perhaps it took eight years for the pre-logical phobia to kick in (Allen, 169).

As I have suggested, Roediger provides a wealth of detail supporting Allen's position; the distinctiveness of Roediger's position, nonetheless, is in its assertion of the autonomy of race, which manifests itself in an emphasis not on the overwhelmingly powerful and complex racist framework to which the Irish actively gave assent--where they did not, they were actively punished--but on their self-making, self-creation, self-invention as white: processes explained repeatedly through references to psychoanalysis. The recourse to psychoanalysis is central if Roediger is to make the case for the explanatory independence of race from class.[10](#)

Roediger assumes that the sexualized character of racial discourse embodied particularly in concerns over "amalgamation" and "miscegenation" require psychoanalytic explanation. Roediger never considers that this element of racist discourse so obviously crucial to antebellum Democratic rule and, later, planter hegemony in the Jim Crow South, is best explained as ideology--in part because ideology is understood as a brainwashing theory that leaves no room for self-making. Roediger calls on psychoanalysis to explain the rage of the draft (and other) rioters. But why should we accept a particularly psychoanalytic explanation of rage--rooted in prelogical phobias?

Given a white-supremacist country where racist ideology was fundamental to both parties; given the anger over fighting what would be a horribly destructive war against their allies; given the success of the Democracy in setting the terms within which the war would be viewed by the Irish proletariat--equating abolition with amalgamation, and both with Lincoln and the Republican party; given the class prejudices involved in the draft where the rich could buy themselves out of conscription for 300 dollars; given the economic difficulties of the urban Irish and fears of job competition, grounded not in reality, but in racist ideology: what is particularly surprising about mob rage, even the grisly acts of not allowing the corpses to be removed?

Why not see this as a terror tactic against a subject population, one allied for primarily ideological reasons, in their (newly whitened Irish) minds with their Republican oppressors for non-psychological reasons? How different is this from the use of spectacular punishment either for purposes of social control or revenge--the regicides described so graphically by Foucault, the spectacles of the hanging tree described by labor historians like Peter Linebaugh, lynching in the Jim Crow South, as terror not tortured sexuality, the sadism of death squads against insurgent populations? Why not explain the ferocity of mob attack as rooted among other things in displaced rage at the ruling classes, whom they also attacked, but not with the impunity granted to them for attacking "an inferior race" symbolically associated with the elites?[11](#)

Iver Bernstein in his book on the draft riots discusses in some detail a case of sexual mutilation, a phenomenon Roediger feels requires the pre-industrial longing, psycho-sexual anxiety hypothesis. In the murder of black coachman, Abraham Franklin, Patrick Butler, sixteen, drags Franklin's previously hung and publicly displayed body through the streets by the genitals and is applauded. As Bernstein puts it, "the sexual intensity, exaggerated gestures and bravado of Butler's act call to mind, more than anything, the mentality of a sixteen-year-old boy," and he informs us that "boys often led the most

violent and sexually charged attacks on black men." If there is undoubted psychosexual anxiety here, it has nothing to do with pre-industrial longings or the rigors of emigration, but adolescent bravado in an ideological atmosphere that can hardly be laid at the door of this anxiety itself--not to mention the fact that young white males were more susceptible to the draft than others "and were easily the most underemployed members of the white male labor force" (Bernstein, 30). The political and ideological context of the hanging and the struggle over the body against Republican-identified militia bears again significant resemblance to the class struggles taking place around the London hanged. In the case of the draft rioters, in wresting the body away from the militia, they were enacting a patently political symbolic victory over the Republicans, who in their mind, to reiterate, were associated with blacks and the destruction of a "white egalitarianism," more ideology than reality, which could hardly be said to be produced autonomously by workers, much less produced as an expression of relatively autonomous psychodynamics.

Roediger, pursuing his psychoanalytic explanation of ambivalence (fascination coupled with repulsion) about blackness, discusses the racist role of John Van Evrie's Caucasian (known also as *The New York Day Book* and "the white man's newspaper"), which "advised readers in 'the producing classes' that cutting their children's throats was preferable to handing them over to 'impartial freedom' and a consequent 'amalgamation with Negroes.'" Dr. Van Evrie, a member of the elite, promoted not only "fears of amalgamation" but the polygeneticist theories of blacks and whites as separate species that played such a central role in pro-slavery ideology. The same paper, according to Roediger, offered an extended advertisement for the 1864 pamphlet "Miscegenation; or The Millennium of Abolition," which argued that "emancipation would reverse racial positions and enslave poor whites." *The Day Book* repeatedly indulged in racist sexual fantasies designed to promote "fear of interracial sex" (*Wages*, 154-5).

Dr. Van Evrie, in his pamphlets and newspaper, combined virulent racism with the rhetoric of popular democracy--in other words, he was a typical elite Jacksonian. As George Fredrickson notes, the appeal to "the common [white] man" was ideology not reality. Van Evrie's rhetoric combined defense of white supremacy with attacks on Northern Capitalists, monarchists, and abolitionists, whom he saw as agents of monarchy and aristocracy. This populism amounted to, in Frederickson's words, an ideology of white egalitarianism "maintained in the face of real inequalities": "Van Evrie was more a deflector of class antagonism than a spokesman for them; his concept of white equality was calculated to appeal to socially insecure whites in search of compensatory foundation for personal pride and status, a sense of identity which could help make the existing social and economic system more tolerable" (*Black Image*, 94-5). Roediger also discusses the role more powerful newspapers played in disseminating this discourse, citing, for example, a *New York World* editorial equating "extravagant 'negrophilism'" with "the breaking of the incest taboo" (*Wages*, 155). *The World* was explicitly a Democratic Party newspaper started by August Belmont--who, while owning *The World* was "head of the banking community and Chairman of the Democratic Party."¹² Why should we view the role of these bourgeois newspapers in psychoanalytic terms instead of ideological ones?

Roediger acknowledges that despite the overwhelming racist climate, blacks and Irish often lived "near each other without significant friction," and that "love and sex between Black men and Irish women were not uncommon." He characterizes both the urban Irish and the urban black as sharing a common longing for lands left behind. Presumably a discourse, even a counterhegemonic one, emerged from and informed these relations. Why should the racist psychosexual discourse and not the counterhegemonic one be disseminated by newspapers and politicians? Ideology or anality? Speaking for a moment in the psychoanalytic lingo of unconscious fantasies, why should there be just racist fears and fascinations around amalgamation? Why not antiracist fascination and fantasy? And if we grant the latter, why didn't it push itself into public discourse?¹³ And a question about the longing for preindustrial erotic joys of the Irish proletariat, from which they were uprooted before being subjected to the harsh realities of wage labor. As Allen shows us, from the end of the eighteenth century until the nineteenth up to the time of the famine was a time, not of preindustrial erotic pastoral, but of fierce class struggle among the Irish peasantry. To take one quote: "The mass organized protest of the angry and impoverished peasants against the payment of the tithe to the Church of Ireland began in November 1830. . . . the scope and intensity of the protest were unprecedented in Irish history" (Allen, 101).

Oddly, Roediger once again acknowledges these facts of class struggle, but it doesn't deter him, for he can say that the rigors of emigration and class struggle in Ireland produced as a reaction formation fantasies of preindustrial pastoral, which, in combination with the industrial morality to which the Irish were subject and their strength in numbers affording them the political possibility to become white, "ensured that they would embrace that possibility to the fullest." Let us recall that the longing for the preindustrial eroticism which didn't exist had to be repressed and subordinated to industrial morality. These joys, denied by the dominant culture, were then projected onto "a degraded race." Ambivalence, deriving from the historical context in part yet also deriving from the white psyche's attitude toward "the blackness within," ironically produces no ambivalence--their racism was "ensured." Yet, switching from a psychohistorical account of ambivalence to a post-Marxist one, he also notes that their oppression need not issue in reaction formation leading to racism, but could, though not necessarily, issue in solidarity with blacks. And he shows us many examples of this solidarity and comments in addition that "a significant minority of the Northern working class was abolitionist." In another passage, the ambivalence disappears again:

within the constrained choices and high risks of antebellum American politics, the choice [of a whiteness uniting them with the hated English] was quite logical. The ways in which the Irish competed for work and adjusted to industrial morality in America made it all but certain that they would adopt and extend the politics of white unity offered by the Democratic Party. (144)

Here the absence of ambivalence derives less from ambivalence itself than from the political structure, the structure of constraint Roediger mentions. The psychoanalytic thesis is meant to account for irrational rage directed at blacks. It seems especially

appropriate for dealing with the phenomenon of blackfaced mobs attacking blacks after enjoying a minstrel show. Yet Roediger himself notes in a rather straightforward way that mobs turned on blacks instead of on the wealthy who were also the target of their anger, not out of any need to secure white identity but because they were following "the path of least resistance," attacking symbolic equivalents of the wealthy because they could, "with impunity":

One further reason that Philadelphia's maskers and many nonblackfaced white mobs attacked blacks is that it was easy. In antiabolitionist mobs, it was often possible to riot in a highly protected setting, in crowds led by conservative members of the city's older elite. Given the choice, late at night, of turning for a last run through an area of posh clubs or a final thrust at the black community, crowds knew that the forces of law and order would vastly prefer the latter. The decision of Sol Smith and his friends to abandon plans to attack the Massachusetts State House and instead to chase "all the niggers off the Common" took the path of least resistance. When an 1835 Baltimore riot turned from an ambitious attack on bank directors' homes and instead savaged a black community, it too had found the easier course. (109)

The psychoanalytically-oriented ambivalence thesis either fails to explain actual ambivalence toward blacks (love as well as hate) or, in explaining it, cannot account for the systemic racist character of institutions, which is what needs explaining. In many ways, the ambivalence thesis is explanatorily analogous to the concept of militarism as an explanation for imperialism. The militarism hypothesis, as I have discussed elsewhere, is basically an aggression thesis, but even if we bought some psychological theory of aggression, militarism doesn't explain the particular directions this aggression takes--a Marxian thesis does, or so I will continue to argue. Insofar as psychoanalysis of race is itself an aggression thesis, it explains the direction of racist aggression only on pain of accepting the anality thesis or something like it. And insofar as it explains racism by explaining systemic anti-black attitudes, it fails to explain either antiracism or the particularities of racist ideology and institutions which Roediger himself frequently shows were laboriously constructed by elites against the danger of interracial alliances.

White Workers and Anti-Asian Racism

I will look at one other example of white working-class racist violence against non-whites: the anti-Chinese racism that formed the backdrop to the exclusion acts of 1882 and after. It seems on the surface a striking example of the autonomy-of-race argument and the corresponding inadequacy of the labor competition hypothesis. I will begin with a summary of Oliver Cox's economic determinist Marxist analysis of anti-Chinese racism. Looking at Cox can help us highlight the crucial differences between a Marxian social control thesis and an economic determinist one. It also demonstrates that, while

Roediger's argument has real claims against economic determinist Marxism, those claims lose much of their force against something like Allen's class analytic social control thesis.

Cox, and I imagine Roediger would agree, states that anti-Asian racism was "mainly initiated by white workers instead of exploiters of labor." He cites, without significant disagreement, one historian's claim that "by the persistent efforts of working people of California, first the state and then the nation have been converted to the policy of oriental exclusion." Organized labor's role, Cox suggests, was based on its class-conscious recognition that "the threat of competition from Asiatic labor" was "a continuing menace to its welfare" (Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 410).¹⁴

Cox then argues that "this reaction of labor is not a peculiarly racial phenomenon" but is essentially a conflict between employer and worker." In fact, Cox amazingly argues, hostility towards Asian competition is not qualitatively different from worker's hostility to the sudden introduction of machinery (workers have been known to riot and attack machines). It is no accident that Cox does not get into the details of anti-Chinese activity, because if he did his absurd parallel between Luddism and the periodic murderousness of anti-Asian racism would crumble. In defense of his position, he cites a white worker:

our grievance is against the humble, tireless, mean-living, unalterably alien field and factory hand, who cuts wages, works for a pittance and lives on less, dwells in tenements which would nauseate the American pig and presents the American workmen the alternative of committing suicide or coming down to John Chinamen's standard of wages and living. (Cox, 411)

Cox, normally extremely attuned to racist discourse, finds none of it here, so blinded is he by the competition argument. For the most part, though, his argument compels him to ignore not only the racist brutality of worker attacks on Chinese--like the murder of dozens of Chinese miners by Knights of Labor in Rock Creek, Colorado, in 1885--but the blatantly racist rationale, more blatant than even that expressed by the anonymous worker. As Alexander Saxton summarizes the exclusion arguments made at an 1893 AFL convention, the Chinese brought with them "nothing but filth, vice and disease" and that "all efforts to elevate them to a higher standard have proved futile," that were it known to what degree Chinese cheap labor had degraded white labor "the American people in their just and righteous anger would sweep them from the face of the earth." In 1901, Samuel Gompers declared to the convention "that every incoming coolie means so much more vice and immorality injected into our social life, and in the same year a labor official from the Cigar Makers Union "quoted with approval a memorial sent to Congress by citizens of San Francisco in which they warned the lawmakers to beware. . . the offspring of miscegenation between Americans and Asiatics, for these proved 'invariably degenerate.'"¹⁵

Marxists who are economic determinists, who analyze white working-class racism via the labor competition hypothesis or what Saxton calls "the direct economic argument," must deny the graphic particularities of racism, must as a corollary view class

consciousness as purified of racialization or gendering. This leads naturally enough to the charge of ahistoricism and hyperrationalism leveled by discourse theorists focusing on how class formation always already takes place in discourse. The ahistoricism of the notion of class interest relied on by economic determinists carries with it the assumption that workers transparently know their interests, which are in turn defined in narrow, economic, calculating, utilitarian terms. Thus, Marxism as economic determinism presupposes a-historical, rationalist Lockean man, and Marxism thus falls prey to the bourgeois ideology it claimed to deconstruct. The flipside of the deracialized version of working-class consciousness is that the ruling class is itself seen in essentially non-racial terms. First, it knows (transparently) its economic interest and then, second, it utilizes racism to legitimate a pre-existing non-racial class consciousness.

There are elements of this critique (though pre-post-Marxist) in Alexander Saxton's excellent first book *The Indispensable Enemy*, from which I have already drawn--much admired by Roediger, who clearly is influenced by it in his autonomy arguments. For example, on the first page, and Roediger will quote this in *The Wages of Whiteness*, Saxton says of white workingmen that "they have been both exploited and exploiters. On the one hand, thrown into competition with nonwhites as enslaved or cheap labor, they suffered economically; on the other hand, being white, they benefitted by that very exploitation which was compelling the nonwhites to work for low wages or for nothing. Ideologically they were drawn in opposite directions. Racial identification cut at right angles to class consciousness" (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 1).

The idea here is that class consciousness does not explain racial hostility; rather racial hostility preshapes class consciousness. So for example in discussing Henry George's seemingly class-based arguments against coolie labor Saxton states that "George preferred the economic argument [cheap labor argument against Chinese labor] and tried to confine himself to that level. Yet the emotional thrust breaks the surface," whereupon Saxton gives evidence of George's racism. Saxton calls this division (we might even call it in poststructuralist fashion George's split self) the dichotomy between "the rational economic argument" and "emotional hostility to the Chinese" (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 102). It is easy enough to see the roots of Roediger's arguments here. It is not surprising that Saxton will be tempted by psychoanalytic arguments of the sort made by Winthrop Jordan. In discussing the relation between proslavery democrats and ideas of racial inferiority Saxton, albeit tentatively, states:

Perhaps most white Americans had always believed, really, in the inferiority of the black. This was at first an emotional response which conflicted with the rationalism of the Declaration and stood in direct opposition to fundamental teachings of Christianity. Where it came from is beyond the scope of this study. Certainly it was not created by the southern defense of slavery nor by the Democratic party's justification of that defense. What these factors added was the sanction of respectability and long custom. (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 26)

These factors, he goes on, "reinforced powerful preexisting factors of racial antagonism" (26).

A Marxian social control argument meets all the objections raised against economic determinism and offers a vantage point for critiquing the incoherent combination of discourse theory and psychoanalysis called upon to supplement and replace class. Interestingly enough, by his next book, Saxton has moved well in the direction of a class analytic social control thesis--undermining at once his nod toward psychohistory and his empiricist argument that white workers were exploiters, benefitting from racism. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, the earlier book contains a wealth of information relevant to a strengthened Marxian argument. The preexistence of racism to job competition such that the latter is viewed through a preexisting racial frame does lend itself to irrationalist, specifically psychoanalytical, takes on this emotional hostility exceeding rationality. And as I've been arguing Roediger takes up this frame in *The Wages of Whiteness*, but also elsewhere.

Thus in an essay on George Rawick, Roediger defends the view that "racism has deep unconscious roots in patterns of repression and is therefore quite irrational." And it is clear that this argument springs from the inadequacy of economic determinism, which as I have said, gets equated with Marxism *tout court*. Neither racism nor antiracism can be explained on "purely structural grounds"; it cannot rely on "labor market based explanations," but must "include, even emphasize, cultural and ideological factors," with culture and ideology understood in the non-Marxian and antifunctionalist sense as autonomous of class.[16](#)

As Saxton will note several times in *The Indispensable Enemy*, the economically based divisions between employers needing cheap labor and white workers resisting it "coincided with a preexisting dichotomy of ideological and organizational patterns that stemmed from Jacksonian politics of the antebellum East" and South (259). What I wish to argue is that these ideological and organizational patterns shaping the terrain upon which the Chinese issue was fought out, however complex, were shaped primarily by the planter-class Democrats in their interest, and there were real serious limitations as to the degree to which these patterns could in anything but the very short run be reappropriated or resignified to benefit white labor against capital.

In other words, the dominant ideology of white supremacy--in its particularities rooted in Jeffersonian and Jacksonian notions of labor republicanism and, later, social Darwinism--would backfire on the white proletariat. Yes, ideology preexisted economic divisions between, say, the railroads and white labor: labor competition was itself an ideology, rationalizing labor racism but decidedly benefitting sections of the ruling class and ultimately the ruling class as a whole. Ideology preexisted particular seemingly economic clashes but it surely didn't preexist the economic *tout court*, much less class relations. And importantly, this pre-existing logic is in no way a mysterious, irrational, psycho-logic nor a mass psychology. There may be deep unconscious patterns of repression and exclusion but these are best explained ideologically not psychoanalytically.

If we are to concur, and I do not, that white workers initiated the racism against the Chinese and other forces gave in or acquiesced, let us look at what the other forces were doing. There were of course the lines drawn over Chinese cheap labor, pitting white workers against segments of big capital--paradigmatically, white railroad workers versus Leland Stanford and Charles Crocker's Central Pacific Road and the Big Six Companies which contracted Chinese labor. The railroads were clearly associated with the Republican Party. We should also note that Crocker and Stanford were unabashed white supremacists, though their paternalist stance on the Chinese differed from the hard racism of white workers demanding Chinese abatement. The southern-led Democratic Party, however, was solidly in support of the white workers and primarily responsible for framing the racist categories, experiences and discourses white workers "took over." As Saxton noted, the encounter with the Chinese was filtered through a Jacksonian *herrenvolk* republicanism forged as part of the defense of slavery, Indian removal, and the Mexican war, fought primarily in the interests of the southern ruling class. The nationalization of the exclusion issue could not have been won through white worker efforts alone.

In 1867, Democrats won back California, electing the governor, two of three congressmen and "a gigantic majority in the Assembly." The newly elected Governor Henry Haight summed up the meaning of the victory:

I will simply say that in this result we protest against corruption and extravagance in our State affairs--against populating this fair state with a race of Asiatics--against sharing with inferior races the Government of the country--against the military despotism which now exists at the South under the late acts of Congress; and this protest of ours, echoing the voice of Connecticut and Kentucky, will be re-echoed in thunder tones by the great central states until the Southern States are emancipated from negro domination, and restored to their proper places as equals and sister in the great Federal family. (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 90-1)

This was September, 1867. Several months earlier, the *San Francisco Examiner*, "official keynoter for the Democracy" (the Democrats), posed the distinctions between Republicans and Democrats in stark racial and class terms. The "Union" or "Mongrel" party defined itself by its commitment to "the universal equality of all races":

Take away the Chinese, negro-suffrage and negro brotherhood plank from their platform, and they become simply a plunder league, banded together to rob the government and use its powers for aggrandizement of special interests and favored classes. . . . The Democracy are. . . the party of the constitution, the party of the people. . . for a white man's government against a great Mongrel military despotism, upheld by a union of the purse and the sword, and sought to be perpetuated through negro and Chinese votes. (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 81)

This is more than just "acquiescing." In Saxton's words, the California campaign "helped prepare the downfall of inter-racial politics in the South." The discourse, apart from being filled with inaccuracies about the egalitarianism of the Republicans, is standard Jacksonian rhetoric, linking blacks, Chinese and big Capital in an unholy alliance against the regular guy. And as is implied by these two comments and made explicit elsewhere in this discourse, blacks and Asians are slaves and coolies, dependent labor, incapable of independence and thus totally reliant on--and dupes of--their masters, the pro-abolition big capitalists.

Interestingly, while the pro-southern democracy was "acquiescing" in the exclusionism they promoted based on a racist discourse they created, southern planters were also experimenting with the idea of importing Chinese cheap labor to discipline the freedmen (Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, chapter 10). Some Chinese were brought in but with the rollback of Reconstruction, their labor problem (the southern planters' labor problem not the labor problem of the clearly unequal yeomen and landless poor whites) was solved and the experiment dropped.¹⁷

By 1877, both major parties in California were on the anti-Chinese bandwagon. This was in Saxton's words "the bi-partisan establishment," formed in the aftermath of the compromise of 1877 and the defeat of Reconstruction. By 1879, Rutherford B. Hayes could argue that "the present Chinese invasion was pernicious and should be discouraged" for "our experience in dealing with the weaker races--the Negroes and Indians--is not encouraging. . . . I would consider with favor any suitable measures to discourage the Chinese from coming to our shores" (Takaki 206). Once "the Democracy resumed its role as left bower of a two-party establishment," the claim of the Democracy to be for the workingman was nearly impossible to uphold. As Saxton puts it: "It had been easy and natural for politicians, cast out in the wilderness, to make promises to others likewise cast out." The rehabilitation of the Democracy had been based on a number of pro-labor promises--from the eight-hour day, to Chinese exclusion and combat against monopoly. Workers got nothing but Chinese Exclusion: "the supposedly ironclad eight-hour act turned into a lawyer's trick" (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 110-12).

If the elites acquiesced to exclusion, the white workers acquiesced in the rest of the program, none of it pro-labor. When the great strikes of 1877 broke out, workers faced "bipartisan opposition":

Democratic railroad directors were no less implacable than their Republican counterparts. Democratic and Republican governors alike summoned state militia and appealed to President Hayes for federal troops; and in the cabinet, southern Democrat David Key. . . stood shoulder to shoulder with Liberal Republican Carl Schurz in support of Republican President Hayes. (*The Indispensable Enemy*, 112)

On the ideological front, as Richard Slotkin has ably shown, the ruling elites, in the midst of the fierce labor struggles of the 1870's, turned the whole package of racist assumptions undergirding Chinese exclusion, against white strikers. Slotkin in his

analysis of racist ideology constantly points out the mechanisms of projection and displacement, a semiotics of "reversible metaphors," by which the ruling elites legitimated their rule and negotiated their contradictions. Metaphors typically characterizing blacks, Indians, women, and the "dangerous classes" of working-class whites (strikers) would circulate from one group to the next.

Indians dispossessed from their land, a process driven by monopolists and speculators, and herded on reservations were turned into "a leisured class of aristocrats and monopolists." While good white workers were "'worthy producers' and models for the Indian," bad white workers (strikers) "are Indians themselves, savage in their propensity for violence and evasion of toil, using strikes and mobs to block access to businesses and public squares just as the Indians use violence to block railroad access to the west"-- "urban savages," in short (*Fatal Environment*, 342). While good white workers, the non-strikers, "the honest workmen," as they were called, were characterized as independent (despite their dependence on capital as wage labor); the bad workers, whether strikers or workers demanding various forms of relief in the cities, were deemed the dangerous classes, a term which in effect not only racialized bad whites (men) but feminized them as well.

If, in the West, white labor used this discourse of the Democracy to equate Chinese coolie labor and monopoly, in the East, white labor itself, via the transformation from "producer" and "honest workman" into "the dangerous classes," became "dependent labor," either allied with greedy monopolists or themselves monopolists. This transformation rests on equating unions with monopoly. Monopoly in turn, and this is utterly consistent with labor republicanism, is unnatural, an artifice imposed on the natural law of the market and free competition, the free competition of independent producers--a formulation falsely equating "honest workers" and their bosses, with everyone else being less than fit, less than white, unnatural. This discourse would pave the way for a full-blown Social Darwinism legitimating imperialism and eventually underwriting an immigration policy in which many Europeans became racialized as inferior and discussed in the same language as Coolie labor (described as swarms or tides that might swamp our independent land, an independence deriving from racial stock).

Roediger does not address in much detail the case of white working-class racism against the Chinese. But he does make a few telling comments. He notes that the use of "racial language to oppose the advancements of darker ethnic groups--based on the equation of blackness with the ethnicity of new immigrant groups--ran through the postbellum labor movement," anti-Chinese racism being a primary example. Roediger comments that "although the Chinese were most insistently charged with being 'nonconsuming' and undermining American standards of living, the defensive 'manliness' and perhaps the longings that characterized anti-black attitudes among white workers also coursed through anti-Chinese propaganda, with the 'Celestials' being charged with the wholesale seduction of white women, the spread of opium addiction and introduction of oral sex into the United States" (*Wages*, 179).

As Roediger's main argument concerns the autonomy of "race" in explaining racism and it is clear that he sees anti-Chinese racism as following from a psychoanalytically informed process of working-class formation, the failure to analyze the ruling elites relation to this discourse and its roots is to say the least damaging to his argument. As I have tried to show, the ruling classes encouraged and promoted anti-Chinese racism in both word and deed. While this racism was initially supported by one section of the ruling class against another, in accordance with what Allen calls "the white worker front," both sides came around to it at the same time as they waged largely successful war against white labor, a war waged with the help of the very discourse Roediger seems to want to argue emerged autonomously from the repressed white working-class psyche.

We ought to recall that it is part of the Jordan thesis that color matters. Color could matter enough to decide the issue between the enslavement of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans. In this narrative, "blackness" cannot be easily transferred to red, brown, yellow, or white people. Just as Indians didn't suffice to secure white identity (not representing sufficiently the carnal instincts), one could argue that by the same token displacement of ambivalent longings onto the Chinese--given these psychoanalytic grounds--should never have taken place.

While Roediger implicitly draws on Jordan in his work, he explicitly draws, as I have noted, on George Rawick's analysis of the psychology of the bourgeoisie, which Roediger then applies to the "white proletariat." For Rawick, the bourgeoisie's rejection of pre-industrial ways for the rigors of an accumulating Protestantism meant that "Englishmen and profit-minded settlers in America 'met the West African as a reformed sinner meets a comrade of his previous debaucheries.'" The racist "'creates a pornography of his former life'" and in order to avoid slipping back into old ways, "'must see a tremendous difference between his reformed self and those whom he formerly resembled.'" Roediger sums up: "blackness and whiteness are thus created together" (*Abolition*, 66). The adoption of an industrial psychology among the elite entails the repression of a pre-industrial psychology and morality. This in turn gets expressed in anti-black racism, white and black as polar oppositions and fundamental ethical and physical distinctions.

Even if we were to accept this Weberian analysis of class formation (did the ruling classes really discipline their characters in the way this thesis demands, or is this more ideology?), why should we accept the translation of industrial/preindustrial into white/black as a psychological phenomenon? Why was the white/black semiotic, described here as an expression of the industrial/preindustrial opposition, not applied in the same way to the English poor--in England and America? As Morgan and Allen have argued, the English and Irish poor were subject to the same processes and were similarly degraded. Though the Irish were racialized in ways the English poor were not and this racialization preceded the onset of industrial morality. But the Irish and the English poor, while degraded and in the former case racialized, were not branded with the white/black semiotic.

If the goal is to explain white/black racism on the basis of the adoption of an industrial psychology, then why does this not apply to the English and Irish in their own countries and in America? Given the striking continuities--color aside--in the depiction of English and Irish poor and blacks in America, what exactly does color explain? If racism, as Allen argues, is a matter of particular kinds of social subordination, then color has nothing to do with racism--is merely a surface phenomenon explaining nothing. If color explains nothing, then it seems to me Rawick's thesis, in which the color opposition is central, crumbles. There are further problems. The industrial/preindustrial split is necessary to give the Rawick/Roediger thesis the ring of historicity. The industrial morality thesis is meant to explain the co-creation of a white/black semiotic. But as I have pointed out, the white/black semiotic does not spring from the formation of an industrial psychology--unless you in fact assume the Jordan/Degler thesis, the pre-existence of white and black as "primary symbols" (Kovel's term). But if you assume this, then the historical character of the white/black opposition crumbles--white and black are not so much created together as unleashed. The semiotics of white and black become products of the a-historical white mind, not in the process of formation, as Roediger wishes to argue in constructivist fashion, but in the process, paradoxically (because the white/black emergence results from repression), of self-discovery. This semiotic could, of course, be explained in ideological terms, but then the recourse to psychoanalysis becomes pointless. At any rate, on the psychoanalytic view, we are back to color as a cause of racism, a depth psychological phenomenon. Now, however, the white/black color thesis fails to explain anti-Chinese racism, much less other forms.

Psychoanalysis can perhaps save itself with what I will call the displacement thesis. It is a major premise of psychoanalysis that the origins of repression can be infinitely masked and displaced. But due to this plasticity of displacement, racist discourse can be turned against "whites" in a sustained way. We have seen this in the example of the "dangerous classes" and in the full-blown discourse of social Darwinism and biological determinism. And of course there is the case of anticommunist discourse, where "whites" become "degraded" through both racialization and sexualization. Conversely, given the ambivalence, flexibility and plasticity, of the longings Roediger sees coursing through racist discourse, why should these longings not translate into a desire for alliance--akin to the Anglo-Irish embrace of Celtic customs? Why didn't proletarian "whites" and "blacks" define themselves as white/superior and the ruling classes as black/inferior? Psychoanalysis combines a "color matters" hypothesis with the displacement hypothesis, but the latter undercuts the former--the two are mutually incompatible, just as the color thesis is incompatible with a constructivist/historical thesis. The key explanatory question then becomes, what explains the particular direction of displacement?

Psychological explanations of racism are admittedly difficult to give up. For me, they are most convincing as explanations of racism because the history of racism against black people has been so thoroughly sexualized. In Jordan's account of, in Kovel's terms, "dominative racism" (the kind predominating during slavery), masters' panic over slave insurrection, in times of crisis, takes the form of a kind of hypersexualization of the black male slave. This hypersexualization results from a psychic dynamic of guilt and

projection--guilt over the slave owners actual sexual relations with slave women projected on to black men in the form of their (black men's) appetite for white women.

The problem is that even here a social control hypothesis explains just as well or better. For one, the psychoanalytic explanation suggests--rather implausibly to my mind--that "faithful" slaveowners either would be less likely to approve of this sexualizing discourse or would object to it on the grounds that it wasn't true. Jordan himself undercuts nicely the specificity of his "blackness within" logic when he notes that "any group faced with a real threat of serious proportions is inclined to sense, even on a conscious level, a sexual element in the opponent's aggressiveness--as many have identified communism with free love." Jordan's main point (though much of the material in his book, as is the case with Roediger, contradicts this thesis) is that whites project the blackness within onto blacks. But this comment about communism is another way of saying what I have said above, that a degrading sexualization of groups has less to do with blackness than with social control.[18](#)

If it were true that threatened groups sexually degrade those perceived as threatening, that fact would underdetermine racial oppression since as Allen puts it both oppressor and oppressed are presumably capable of the same assumptions. Thus the multi-"racial" groups of slaves and bond-laborers so disturbing the social order in 17th-century Virginia may have degraded the sexuality of the planter bourgeoisie (that Jordan does not suggest this just means that his notion of "group" takes racism for granted instead of explaining it).

Moreover, Jordan himself shows that sexualization is only a small part, even in the discourse of slavemasters, of social control. Psychoanalysis accounts best for sexualization of blacks; it accounts for sexualization of other groups, the Chinese and communists, only, as I suggest, at the price of incoherence. Further, it fares even worse with ideological discourses and practices irreducible to, though rarely entirely free of, sexualization, yet crucial for social control. When the psychoanalytic hypothesis seems most convincing, it is because it does not conflict in any essential way with a Marxian social control hypothesis. Or as late Saxton puts it in a discussion of John Adams' views on racism, the argument "that white European Americans constructed metaphors linking African blackness to shameful acts and to the dark passions of sexuality. . . seems to work plausibly when placed in a dependent relationship to prior ideological constructions."[19](#)

Psychoanalysis would be truly convincing only if it could override Marxian explanations--but it only overrides bad Marxian explanations of the economic determinist variety. Good Marxian explanations, however, as I have argued, have vastly greater explanatory advantages--advantages in coherence and scope. In short, psychoanalysis can purchase coherence only by sacrificing scope and purchases scope only at the cost of ad hoc readjustment as in Kovel's attempts to explain racism's changing shapes via mysterious permutations in the forms of anality (dominative, aversive, metaracist). Or with compromise formations.

Central to Roediger's account of white working-class racism and the autonomy of race is the discourse of labor republicanism, the producer ethic as it is often called. This labor republicanism is, according to Roediger, in a significant sense created by the working class; or rather is the discourse of its self-constitution whose flipside is the degradation of black people and their association with "dependency." Labor republicanism is indeed extremely important for understanding white working-class racism, but its significance is much better explained as racist ideology functional for class rule.

While it may be true that labor republicanism was essential in the construction of white working-class identity, it is also true that this labor republicanism has been crucial to the mystification of the class structure. Alexander Saxton has put it well: "The ideological inheritance of organized labor in the United States was the Producer Ethic," an outlook that "emphasized an egalitarianism reserved for whites and rejected the notion of class" (Saxton, 1990, 313). As Roediger, Saxton and Morgan argue, labor republicanism is predicated on the valorization of white egalitarianism and the degradation of non-whites. It is also predicated on the jettisoning of class and, following the Jeffersonian natural rights tradition, the self-evidence (non-constructedness) of all these things: the self-evidence of a racialized (and gendered) notion of autonomous individuality in which the white male property holder and then the white male mechanic are in essence and by nature self-evidently free and independent--so that "free and independent" means "white male" and vice-versa. Class is viewed as an artificial imposition on all this self-evidence.

The notion of "class structure" becomes a kind of corruption of labor republican purity instead of the context within which the formation of labor republicanism takes place. Racism is naturalized and its class context is lost. What Slotkin says about the discourse of free labor is more than pertinent:

In the nature of things, then, under free labor the normal course of human development will be from rags to riches. No systemic blocks exist: only the grasping for power by the advocates of the mud-sill theory [that "society rests on its lower classes as a house rests on its permanent earthen sill] stands in the way of its realization; only defects of human character will prevent the fulfillment of normal development under the system. (Slotkin, 218)

For Lincoln, there is no contradiction between capital and labor in the nature of things so that if laborers of good character exercise this character, they in the course of time will themselves become capitalists. Insofar as this fails to occur, the corruption of character is the reason. Corrupt characters, though, are many--they could be lazy workers, strikers (who are lazy workers), slaveholders, who have erected a class system, but a system which again is artificial, unnatural, the product of both their corrupt character and the corrupt character of their victims (the slaves). As Alexander Saxton has noted, the basics of this discourse were common ideological currency in both north and south, though indeed this discourse could be turned in different directions--planters and white workers using it against northern monopoly, Northern capital and labor using it against the Planter

class. But whatever direction it turned, it naturalized racism and individualism and correlatively mystified the class structure.

Since I have been in North Carolina (seven years), I have heard white workers at least a half dozen times use the term "nigger rigged" or variations on this--"nigger engineered," and the more politically correct "Afro-engineered." When I showed my displeasure at this sort of language to a worker who used the phrase in commenting on our fireplace in need of repair (he got fired for this comment), he backed off, flustered, and said "Oh, I mean white nigger, white trash." Perhaps following Roediger this is another example of white working-class discourse and white working-class self making. This phrase surely did not emerge from media discourse. And yet, such phrases come right out of the Jacksonian free labor ideology I have been discussing. In a sense, this might be seen as a "residual discourse," though the implication that it had a life of its own would be on my view quite incorrect.

For what is actively at work in our culture, with examples in the media every day, is a nexus of individualism and blame-the-victim ideology (the two imply one another), both rooted in the myth of classlessness. Or what amounts to the same thing, the myth of the middle class. There is no structural antagonism between capital and labor--and if people have good, solid middle-class values, they will succeed (a recent *Greensboro News and Record* points to a story in its inside pages with the headline--"workers learn to be self-sufficient in case they're hit by downsizing"). There is no way racist ideology can be overcome if this myth retains its hold. Racist ideology takes different forms--from the persistence of biological determinism to the racialization of welfare (which has its flipsides--one being the racialization of hard work, another the rendering invisible of welfare for the rich, in comparison with which the welfare for the poor is itself nearly invisible) and crime. Southern white workers use of phrases like "nigger rigged" is not implanted by the ruling class or internalized or passively ingested--it is nevertheless fed by numerous ideological currents.

One might wonder, following Roediger's psychoanalytic meditations, whether longings coursed through this discourse or not. Roediger, in his concluding chapter of *Wages*, states rather forcefully that whiteness, "taking shape as it does behind dams of repression," "can be swept away dramatically when the dams begin to break as I have argued elsewhere they today may be breaking." He then qualifies himself to note that the "habit of whiteness and the conditions that produced it survived" (176-7). I have tried to argue that whatever is going on with the dams and the longings (whose premises are themselves at best problematic), they don't much matter for explaining the changing shapes of racism. If habits have survived, it is not due to any autonomy of race but to conditions of class rule, whose particulars, as always, have been constantly shifting but whose essence, historical through and through, has not.

Notes

1 Roediger is not often viewed as a post-Marxist, but as someone working within the Marxist tradition. While far more sympathetic to Marxism than the more purely theoretical post-Marxists, Roediger distorts class analysis in ways that are hard to distinguish from the post-Marxist project.

2 See my book manuscript, "The Difference Class Makes: Marxism, Moral Realism, and Anti-Racism," for a detailed Marxian critique of Joel Kovel's psychohistorical account of white racism. Roediger acknowledges explicitly his debt to Kovel:

The analysis of whiteness as the product of specific classes' attempts to come to terms with their class--never simply economic--problems by projecting their longings onto a despised race grows directly out of George Rawick's closing chapter in *From Sunup to Sundown: The Making of the Black Community*, in which Rawick probes the racism of the 17th and 18th century anglo-american bourgeoisie. Rawick's largely unacknowledged debt is to the Freudian tradition. I owe a similar debt, especially to the work of Frantz Fanon and Joel Kovel, who forcefully insist on the need for dialectical and materialist approaches within the psychoanalytic framework. "Just as the creation of white wealth pushed Blacks down," Kovel writes, "so must the presence of degraded black bodies have exerted a continual stimulation to the continued pursuit of abstracted money." In the work of both Rawick and Kovel, projection of desires onto others is very far from being an idealist enterprise. (Roediger, 1990, 14)

Despite the dialectical appearances here--white wealth and black bodies mutually stimulating each other in pursuit of accumulation--Kovel's analysis is reductionist and incoherent: processes of capital accumulation are epiphenomena of the anal complex. As I show in my critique, this is indeed an idealist enterprise, however "base" shit may appear.

3 Allen, 1994, 159.

4 See also Lott, 1995, 95.

5 In *Racial Conditions*, Winant has recourse to psychoanalysis to explain the persistence of racism ("the longue duree"). For a critique, see chapter four--"Post-Marxism as Compromise Formation"--of my manuscript, "The Difference Class Makes: Marxism, Moral Realism and Anti-Racism."

6 This point will be elaborated. But see Stephen Chorover's *From Genesis to Genocide*, Vincent Pecora's brilliant "The Limits of Local Knowledge," collected in *The New Historicism* (1989), edited by H. Aram Veveser. Pecora's essay shows that thick description, with all its rhetorics of locality and particularity, ends up wiping away the

historical significance of the Indonesian genocide by tacitly relying on the psychoanalytic and modernist, utterly a-historical and universal binary of Apollo and Dionysius to explain the explosion of peasant rage against the PKI. For a much better explanation of genocidal peasant rage, see Gerald Prunier's *The Rwanda Crisis* (1995). Prunier's analysis is compatible, if suitably reinterpreted, with the analysis offered here. I discuss his economic determinist misinterpretation of Marxism and the consequences that follow from it in chapter two of "The Difference Class Makes."

[7](#) I do not have time here to elaborate sufficiently on the question of white worker interests. I do so in my book and in an unpublished essay, "The Color Line and the Problem of the White Worker." Among other things, the essay looks at the contrasting philosophical assumptions about interest underlying the debates between Marxists, Neo-Marxists and Post-Marxists.

[8](#) On invention and its function in Marxist and post-Marxist discourse, see Teresa Ebert's *Ludic Feminism*, especially chapter four. The voluntarism assumed in such a concept is at work in Roediger, much as it is in the ludic feminism of Cornell, Butler, and Haraway.

[9](#) That the Irish were constructed at various points in the relation between England and Ireland as an inferior race in precisely the same way as blacks in America were constructed as inferior is one of Allen's key claims. I discuss this analogy at some length in my book. It is interesting to note that Frederick Douglass, in the aftermath of Reconstruction, during a speech attacking English rule in Ireland, shouted out, "Fellow citizens, we want no black Ireland in America" (McFeely, 1991, 318).

[10](#) For Roediger's theoretical formulations critiquing the primacy of class over race, see the introduction to *Wages*, especially pp. 6-11. See my critique of this discussion in "The Difference Class Makes."

[11](#) See Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged*. On the "relative autonomy" of sadism, I would like to quote Chomsky on training death squads in El Salvador: "The armed forces 'scoop up recruits' from the age of thirteen and indoctrinate them with rituals adopted from the Nazi SS, including brutalization and rape, so that they are prepared for killing with sexual overtones, as a religious rite. . . . This 'sado-masochistic killing creates terror' and 'terror creates passivity in the face of oppression.'" The function of this "special warfare" consists in "'murderously eliminating every endeavor of the popular organizations under the allegation of communism or terrorism.'" See Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, 392. The sadism of death squads is understood in the context of power relations, class rule, and U.S. foreign policy. It is fallacious to explain it in terms of something like pre-logical phobias.

[12](#) See Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 333.

[13](#) Eric Lott argues that such subversion did break into public discourse in the minstrel show itself. If, in one psychoanalytic tradition, racial ambivalence rooted in the anal complex produces a perpetual hunger for racial purity, in more recent versions of this

thesis, this hunger for purity is always undermined by subversive moments of genuine racial identification. Lott, in his study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, takes this latter tack. More needs to be said about this interesting, passionate but nevertheless flawed book. I'd like to focus my brief comments on his analysis of miscegenation. In his analysis of the complex play of identification and disidentification between the largely white working-class audience and the minstrel in black face, miscegenation is simultaneously distanced by taboo and symbolically engaged in by the white audience. At times, Lott views, albeit nervously, these moments of identification as counterhegemonic, potentially explosive, proto-abolitionist. This thick description, so "concretely historical," largely ignores the fact that the art form of minstrelsy was allied from start to finish with the Democratic Party. To take up the anti-aristocratic class values expressed at times in minstrelsy, it is important to note that pro-southern Jacksonianism legitimated the alliance of white workers with slaveholders--denouncing monopoly and aristocracy while defending capital, even big capital all the way--the latter just got termed "producers."

Lott, like *Roediger*, mostly ignores this larger ideological context--what Allen refers to as the Democrats forging of the white worker front. Once again, miscegenation, instead of being treated historically--how it got coded into law as illegal and taboo, what use was made of it by powerful Democratic ideologists like James Kirke Paulding--is seen as an almost purely psychic process: "ideologies of miscegenation were the primary defense against this psychic tangle"--a tangle deriving from the desperate attempts of white workers to secure their whiteness against the gravitational force of what Lott calls "the dangerous power of the black body," rooted in fears of "pre-oedipal suffocation." Lott is right to see cultural phenomena like minstrelsy as not only complex but registering in mediated ways social conflicts. Complexity and counterhegemony are not the same thing, however. If minstrelsy was counterhegemonic, it would have been stopped. I would note that minstrelsy performed by black people was, however popular, shut down by the authorities. The potential threat from "black autonomy" drew a response from the ruling classes. That white blackface minstrelsy drew no similar response indicated that the rulers did not see any counterhegemony there. Perhaps they were too stupid to see the "trickster elements" that might potentially threaten their social order. I have my doubts. (See Lott, 1995, chaps. 5 and 6.)

Despite all the appeals to the historical text in this book, Lott's notion of ambivalence allows for potentially counterhegemonic resistance absolutely everywhere. Here, for example, is a possible "counterhegemonic" reading of rape that employs Lott's assumptions: White men raping black women as part of what seems to be a terrorist campaign to reassert racial etiquette and social control (the year is 1871) is more complex and unsettled/unsettling, a more overdetermined social practice than we might think. We fail to get at just how precarious rapists live their whiteness when raping black women if we judge too quickly from our superior vantage point in the present. The rape simultaneously enacts the boundaries of white supremacy and erases them through a moment of ambivalent identification/disidentification which exceeds the capacity of the Lacanian symbolic to channel it into the fixed forms of ideology. What we must not fail to ignore is the utopian moment (it is only a moment but moments can be momentous) of

identification and love (shot through with theft) for the black female body (though the real target here is of course the black male body), a love/theft complicating and exceeding any ideology which would reduce it to a direct economic function. What we must also not fail to ignore is the potential emancipatory effect that results from breaking the miscegenation taboo (which is itself never simple). Progressive alliances come from strange, unpredictable places--the place of the uncanny in which radical alterity and the security of the self-same precariously coincide. At any rate, this indirect subversion of the ban on interracial alliance through the tortuous and not merely torturing agency of the rape might be more effective in the long run than any transparent confrontation of racism led by "the vanguard party."

[14](#) Oliver Cox, 1974, 410.

[15](#) Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 271-3.

[16](#) Roediger, *Abolition*, 66.

[17](#) Takaki, chapter 10.

[18](#) Jordan, 153.

[19](#) Saxton, 1990, 89.

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