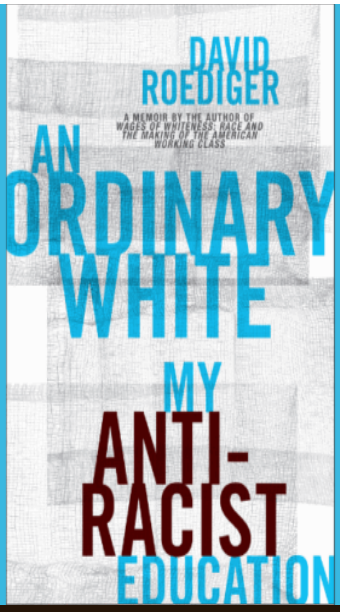
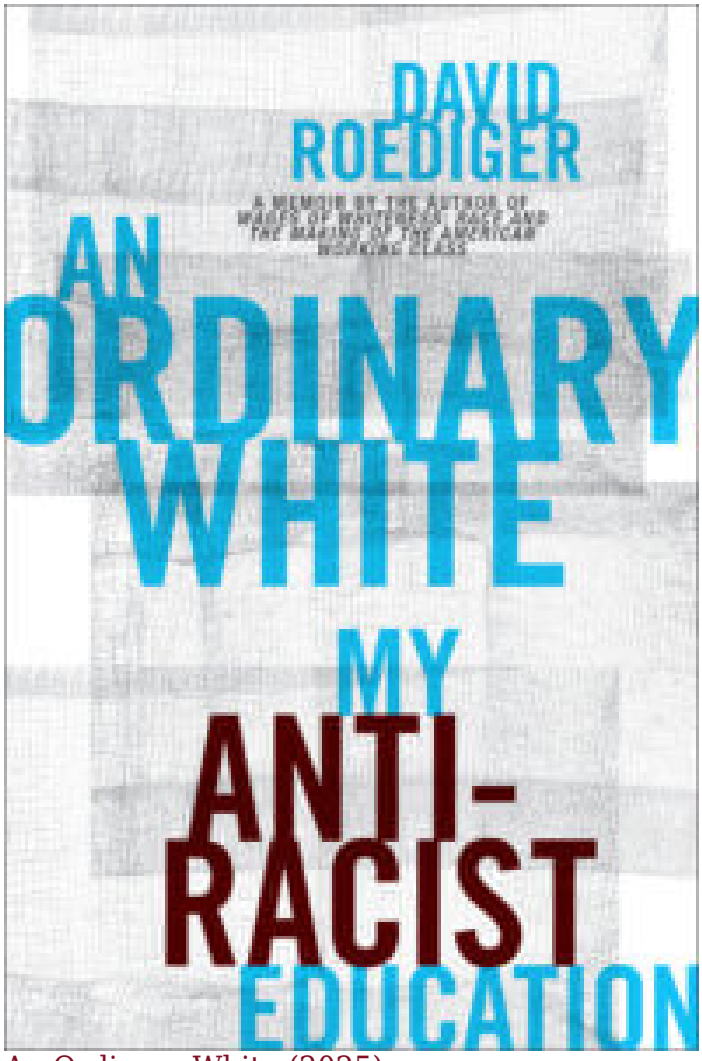


David Roediger on his new book, An Ordinary White

Posted on September 28, 2025 by Rosemary Feurer

In his new memoir, An Ordinary White: My Antiracist Education (2025)*, David Roediger provides a moving account of his lifetime of scholarship and activism. Beginning with his upbringing in a Midwestern sundown town, Roediger offers an account of how the social movements of his time, from the labor movement to the antiwar movement to the Black Freedom struggle, shaped his trajectory towards a radical antiracism. Importantly, he uses his experiences to argue against the characterization of poor and working class whites as uniquely or intractably racist, pushing back against essentialist views of racial politics as we confront the rising tide of white nationalism today. Rosemary Feurer spoke with Roediger about his new book.*



An Ordinary White (2025)

Your dialog and research on your early life looms large throughout the book. Of course, any reader of *Wages of Whiteness* has learned a little of that influence, but this seems to be an expansive and reshaped narrative of that influence. Can you highlight some of your purpose for telling us about Columbia and Cairo, Illinois?

The two towns represented what were in the 1950s and 60s, when I grew up, dominant sites for the learning of white supremacy. Columbia was, avowedly and unapologetically, a "sundown town." Its 3200 or so residents lived just a short drive from the Black communities in East St. Louis and St. Louis, where many worked. But in the little town of Columbia they largely accepted policing policies that forbade African Americans from being present after dark and thus from living there. Living in a largely German-American place, built near a limestone quarry and amidst farms, Columbia's youngsters worshipped African

American sports stars, especially on the Cardinals baseball teams in St. Louis. We loved soul music and longed to be in East St. Louis nightspots. Nevertheless, we were made to believe that insulation from integrated spaces made the good life in a small town possible.

In summers I lived in Cairo, where the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers join at Illinois' southern tip. Only three times as large as Columbia it seemed positively urban to me, by virtue of its night life, river and rail traffic, movie theatre, and the presence of a vibrant Black community nurturing a brave civil rights movement. White resistance to that movement, sometimes armed, made Cairo exemplify another archetypical site where racism took place—the city or neighborhood that was not whites-only but that practiced massive resistance to Black equality. Cairo, I grew up hearing from whites there, was "further South than Richmond."

Ultimately, it was fortuitous contact, through a small Black Catholic church, with the freedom movement in Cairo that changed my young life. Those experiences opened a possibility of a world beyond Jim Crow and sundown practices, a world where longstanding injustices could be fought. But even before learning of that movement the juxtaposition of experiences in the two towns—so different in their makeup and forms of exclusion but so similar in their destructive commitments to whiteness—had prepared me to think that white identity was anything but simple and seamless.

The book allowed me to understand the elements and development of *Wages of Whiteness* much more clearly than I had previously. To list just one example, I was struck for example by how much your Freudian and psychohistory interest developed already while studying as an undergraduate at Northern Illinois University. Your roaming St. Louis and meeting George Rawick as an intellectual journey, and more. And I think your memoir offers a much more hopeful reading than at least my reading of *Wages* did. So I saw it as an effort to reset our understanding and estimation of *Wages,* to consider it within a life work in which hopes of activism and critique of labor history resided, but also to suggest that you should not solely be defined by it. Can you highlight what your goals were in respect to *Wages* for the memoir?

(And sidenote: the description of activism at NIU and how you made it to graduate school makes the memoir worth buying!)

These are such good questions. I especially appreciate the point you make about the Freudian tradition because it allows a response that speaks about how important my undergraduate education in the History Department at Northern Illinois University proved

to be. It was, famously, a leading Marxist department and I first learned Marxism there. But the half or so of the department that did not share a Marxist approach was also deeply interesting and much influenced by the presence of the left. Steve Kern taught me Freud first. Margaret George, the best of the left historians at Northern and a socialist-feminist, then guided me in basing a major paper on Victorian pornography on the work of Herbert Marcuse, whom I approached as much from his work on Freud as much as that on Marxism. When I met Rawick I was already prepared to respond to how much his brilliant conclusion to *From Sundown to Sunup* rested on psychoanalytic insights, borrowed mainly from the Communist period in the career of Wilhelm Reich. Not much later, in meeting and coming to collaborate with the Chicago Surrealist Group, this orientation to psychoanalysis served me well.

As to goals that I want or want readers to take from *Wages of Whiteness*, I suspect I gave that up when the book turned 20 or so. Now that it approaches 35, I remember its specifics too little to be decisive even if I wanted to. When the book came out, my friend Eli Zaretsky told me, "You'll never write a better book." That seemed harsh until I realized he meant better-received book. His point, and it applied also to his earlier and important *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*, was that certain books are written by their moment and amidst the clarity and confusion of social movements in those moments. In that sense, *Wages of Whiteness* was not simply mine. The varied readings of it ranged from "too down on white people" (as a Florida student observed), to improperly "airing labor's dirty laundry" (as a senior colleague in labor history charged), to praises for its astringency in pointing out what white labor can't do for itself (as Gerald Horne and others have held). I like the last assessments best but even those with whom I most disagree with have moved debate forward.

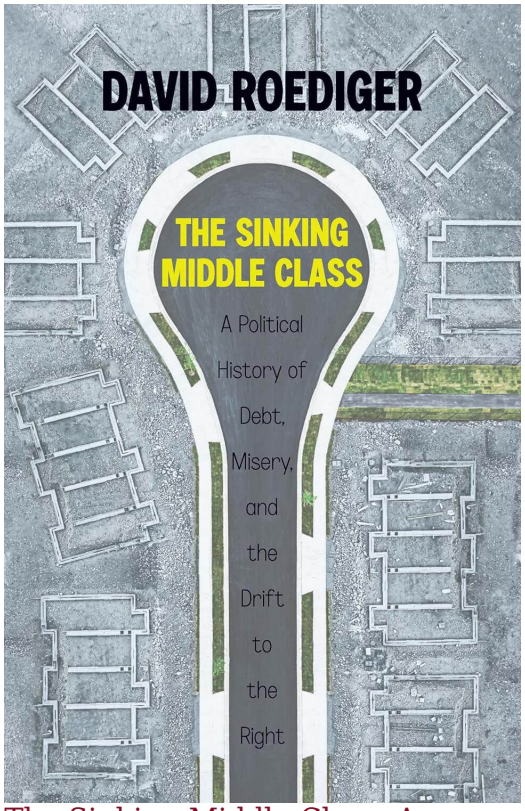
Wages of Whiteness, like kindred work by Toni Morrison, Cheryl Harris, Alex Saxton, Noel Ignatiev, and others at about the same early 1990s time, was written to respond to an era in which Ronald Reagan had sent the Republican Party unimaginably to the right and one in which Bill Clinton was poised to send the Democratic Party unimaginably to the right. Both did so with significant support from Reagan Democrats, the white voting bloc both parties hailed. Many of us who wrote, even those like myself not electorally oriented, thought that the labor movement lacked answers matching the scale of the crisis and that they were unable or unwilling to tell their white members what was at stake. We argued, implicitly and explicitly, that confronting how white supremacy disfigured labor movements was one part of re-imagining and rebuilding movements and coalitions. In *Wages* I hoped, if memory serves, to show that white workers could not—while conceiving of their interests as whites as well as workers—create a genuine labor movement. But they did respond, however

briefly, to the self-emancipation of the enslaved by changing themselves.

By the time of *An Ordinary White* we had perhaps succeeded too well in establishing that workers racialized and racializing themselves as white had what W. E.B. Du Bois called "white blindspots" that limited social movements. The reigning wisdom sometimes has had it that those problems defined such workers utterly. Moreover, we now faced not just devastating rightward motion but incipient fascism. In entering fights like those thrust on us we need to realize anew that workers typed as white have lots of thought running around in their heads and do change over time. That was, as *An Ordinary White* argues, the story of my life.

You do mention in the memoir that you wish some of your other work had gained as much attention. What do you most regret did not get read and debated as much as you had hoped?

I sometimes worry that I like my books almost in inverse proportion to how well they sell. That can't be good formula for commercial success. But it is true. *Wages of Whiteness*, by a long-distance the best-selling of my books, is far from my favorite and in my estimation definitely not the best of them. Part of my love of my own longshot books is love of longshot characters. I wish that there was a big readership, for example, for the adventures of old Wobblies like Covington Hall or Fred Thompson, whose writings I have edited. When *Seizing Freedom* appeared I was pretty sure it would be the book assigned to close survey courses on US history through 1877 and one widely chosen to begin classes treating the US from the Civil War to the present. It so covered–indeed connected–the self-emancipation of enslaved people, the rise of a national labor movement inspired by witnessing that emancipation, and initiatives for women's freedom that it seemed perfect to me. It did gain some readership but not what I'd hoped for in classes on US history. Perhaps its ambition to braid together several stories was a reach too far.

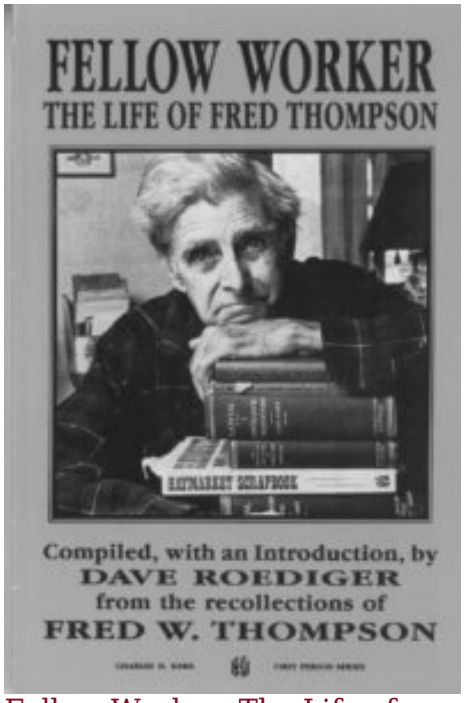


The Sinking Middle Class: A Political History of Debt, Misery and the Drift Toward the Right by David Roediger

But to answer the question directly, the title I'd most like to see less neglected is *The Sinking Middle Class*, which attracted some attention but was cursed by appearing during Covid, which interrupted publicizing it, and by its coinciding with the first presidency of Donald Trump, whose baleful presence convinced me to structure key early sections of what's a pretty deeply historical book around explaining *him* and his base of support. All that said and freely accepting there was, when the book appeared, little reason for anyone to credit me with being an historian of the middle class, I hope that it finds its way to a broader audience even now. It contains important arguments against the idea that US history is that of a middle class nation, strong provocations on the middle class in the Marxist tradition, and serious attempts to think about how the line between the working and middle class is not only obscured by the maneuvers of political elites but also is made hard to draw because of real complexities of workers' lives on and off the job.

I personally love the *The Sinking Middle Class*, which I have used in my classes, and I read it in one evening, couldn't put it down. On the subject of books, though,

a good deal of your budding public history work was helping to save Charles Kerr publishers, which was part of a collective effort to connect with the REALLY old left, part of a noble tradition of popularizing the left. Your description of the tedious efforts is combined with great stories of how it brought you in touch with the likes of (among others) Fred Thompson, Archie Green and C.L.R. James. I found that this part of your book, the connection between activism and intellectual elements of scholarship, is an overlooked part of a praxis that is significant. It also produced some of my favorites, from *Haymarket Scrapbook* to *The Big Red Songbook*. Can you help us understand why you did this work?

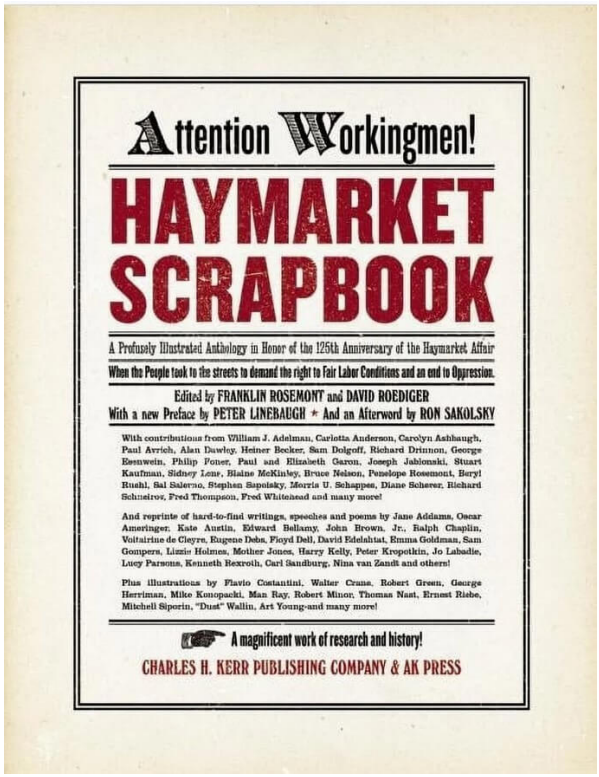


Fellow Worker: The Life of Fred Thompson (1994). Thompson, IWW strategist and historian, is pictured with a stack of Charles H. Kerr Company books, old and new. Credit: David Roediger.

I threw myself into Kerr Company work in the context of two defeats. One was the failure of a Chicago left bookstore collective I'd helped found and the other the speedy smashing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization's strike of 1981. Suddenly I had lots of time on my hands. The militant working class intellectuals who'd acquired the Kerr Company in the 1920s, just after its glorious heyday in the earlier 1900s, were members of

the Proletarian Party (PP). They kept Kerr afloat for half a century. But by the late 1970s their membership had dwindled and the members active in the publishing company aged. They asked Fred Thompson, the wonderful Industrial Workers of World strategist and historian, to join other non-PP old-timers in giving the "world's oldest socialist publisher" what Thompson called "a decent burial." His associates and Thompson ultimately brought in a few much younger radicals, in my case I think initially mostly to move boxes and mail things. The energy of the surrealists Penelope and Franklin Rosemont soon provided day-to-day labor and a vision that profited from the presence of veteran collective members including Thompson, the artist Carlos Cortez, and others. Our first goal became to survive till 1986, the centenary of both the Haymarket bombing and of Kerr's founding. The *Haymarket Scrapbook* celebrated that milestone. A generous Friends of Kerr group included such figures as Studs Terkel, Stephen Jay

Gould, Jack Conroy, and David Montgomery. That plus sales of archival materials, support from the Illinois Labor History Society, and collusion by a score of friends willing to assign Upton Sinclair's *The Flivver King* in big college classes enabled the publication of scores of new and old titles, two of them helping rekindle interest in Lucy Parsons. We had the honor of keeping *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* in print alongside Paul Lafargue's *The Right to Be Lazy*. I regarded my decades of work with Kerr as movement, rather than academic, work and was aware enough to know it would never be credited as the latter. But it did make me an editor, learning from Thompson, and a writer aware of a popular audience. It was a left space in which my kids were comfortable. And it let me produce books honoring some of my heroes, including Albert Parsons, George Rawick, and Covington Hall.



25th anniversary edition of The Haymarket Scrapbook

You end your memoir with a piercing indictment of higher education, one that was written before this current implosion. You face the hard facts as an "academic worker seeking to stem the decline of the university." Can you highlight some of what you are doing in that chapter?

When *An Ordinary White* was written does, as you point out in your question, matter here. It went to press just before Trump's 2024 election. In fact, I was still thinking the election result would favor Kamala Harris when I sent it off. The closing chapter intended to be provocatively pessimistic about whether large state universities could survive—I have taught in Midwestern "flagship" institutions the last 40 years—as something other than a research park and athletic brand in even the medium term. It is true that, since Trump took office, actually existing dystopia has outstripped my gloomiest forebodings, especially where academic repression, racism, transphobia and Islamophobia, contempt for ideas and labor, pusillanimity of administrators, and worship of austerity are concerned. Trump clearly has made things far worse. But much of the chapter retains force because the roots of the crisis in universities run so deep. Faculty and students faced state legislature investigations when I attended Northern Illinois; Northwestern fairly embodied the corporate university and fiercely opposed taking on apartheid as an issue as did Missouri; Minnesota fiercely fought

its unions with tactics any private employer might have envied; Illinois did likewise and betrayed hopes that it would jettison its racist mascot year after year. Kansas has epitomized the problem of the state university in a very red state in its inveterate impulse to anticipate and overshoot the most draconian possible state action.

David Roediger speaking before an occupation of the president's office at Northwestern University, protesting against investments in South Africa. 1985. Credit: David Roediger.

Those dramas are rehearsed in the book's concluding pages but alongside more overarching structural analysis. Thorstein Veblen's great old book on "higher learning" is leaned on not only to explain the role of the "business class" but also the specific problem of universities fundraising for buildings, and often athletic buildings, not for working capital. The mania for building in its current form cements an alliance of state universities with the finance capitalists arranging deals and regional construction interests. The rural settings of many state universities, I argue, provided them with excellent cheap staff labor, often bright, but relatively un-credentialled, women in the area. Part of the crisis in staff labor involves the drying up of that pool. The underfunding of universities, addressed and avoided by raising tuition, has left college far less of a bargain for working-class young people. Student debt,

plus administrative complicity, has left students open to the argument that higher education is merely job training. It is not a pretty picture, as we all know.

Authors

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  Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950, among other books and essays. She is working on The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940 and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.

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  David Roediger

  David Roediger is the Foundation Professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas. His scholarship focuses on the history of race, class, labor, and social movements in the United States. Roediger's recent works include The Sinking Middle Class: A Political History (2020); Class, Race, and Marxism (2017), and Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All (2014).

