Roediger, David. (2025) *An Ordinary White: My Antiracist Education*. Fordham University Press.

Review by Scott Henkel

David Roediger was scheduled to speak about his wonderful new book, *An Ordinary White: My Antiracist Education* at an event hosted by the University History Institute in Little Rock, Arkansas in April, 2026. The institute has a decades-long partnership with the University of Arkansas, its History department, and local historians. But university administrators worried that the event would arouse conservative legislators, who had passed the Arkansas ACCESS Act, one of several recent laws around the country that ban efforts to address inequality. The university administrators believed that the event would not violate the law but nevertheless asked the organizers to change its content. The organizers refused, stating correctly that attempts to guess what would or would not merely displease conservative lawmakers would be "a fool's errand." Still, the university administrators, out of an abundance of timidity, insisted upon the changes. The department chair resigned in protest and the faculty took a series of votes to defend academic freedom. Ultimately they moved the event to Little Rock's Main Library so Roediger could speak freely. Let's give cheers to historians who protect academic freedom when administrators don't and to the librarians of the Central Arkansas Library System for welcoming Roediger to tell his story.

But still, this incident must give Roediger heartburn. The assumption that undergirds legislation like the Arkansas ACCESS Act is that efforts to address racial inequality are unjust, rather than the injustices that led to the inequality. This bit of upside-downism is as old as Reconstruction, and Roediger has spent much of his career explaining why it is spurious, but here it is nevertheless. *An Ordinary White* is Roediger's autobiography. If it comes out in a second edition, it could have an epilogue about the University of Arkansas incident that says: see? This is what I've been talking about. Look at what whites will do to protect their power.

This incident is Roediger's most recent experience with censorship. The first he mentions in the autobiography was his high school-era underground newspaper *Huggermugger*, which aroused a guidance counselor to contact prospective universities to warn them about Roediger's radicalism, and from which he learned lessons about how power works, he writes, at least in the cornfields of southern Illinois (p. 45). Roediger co-wrote his first book, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day*, with Philip Foner, whose decades-long blacklisting made publishing the book difficult (p. 126-9). The list goes on, like a thread through *An Ordinary White*.

That thread is woven with another: Roediger notes his early realization that "the most influential revolutionary theorists wrote to be understood" (p. 64). It is in fact a fool's errand to predict what will attract a censor's ire, but it's a safe bet that the more power a writer has to attract readers, the more agitated a censor gets. Early on and throughout the book, Roediger insists that the ideas he's spent his career writing about are "fathomable," by which he means that ordinary people can understand antiracist ideas through their own experiences and their own study of those

experiences. Of course, those views do take effort and study to achieve, and Roediger is an expert guide in that effort. What emerges in the pages of Roediger's autobiography is a picture of a smart, and sometimes smart-alecky, self-deprecating, working-class human being, the kind of person who recognizes the roadblocks to and possibilities for human equality, but also doesn't take himself too seriously. He insists that the processes that perpetuate injustice are fathomable, that ordinary whites and everyone else can discover that this is not the best of all possible worlds, not even close. That some whites have made this discovery is certainly a threat, so it's no surprise to see a backlash.

It makes sense to see these threads woven in Roediger's autobiography--a writer who wants to be understood is met by censors who want to block others from understanding. So don't be fooled: censors know that ideas have power--that's why they want them censored--and Roediger's work is powerful. He writes that his book *The Wages of Whiteness* made him "low-key famous" (p. 138). Additional books built his ideas further, to name just a few that are significant to his life story: *Class, Race, and Marxism*, a collection of essays on his methods; *History Against Misery*, a book published by the Charles H. Kerr company, a publisher he has been affiliated with since the 1970s; the anthology *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means To Be White*; and *Seizing Freedom*, which builds from W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the general strike of slaves during the Civil War to show that "when it proceeds from below, the good example of freedom struggles spreads in unpredictable ways" (*Seizing* p. 14). Roediger's body of work shows his insistence that radical scholarship must have a high quality because its slightest imperfection will receive a challenge (p. 114).

In his autobiography, as in these other books, Roediger is at pains to point out that he was one of several writers, especially Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, who reminded their readers of the tradition of Black authors who argued that racism was a problem of whiteness. As obvious as this argument may sound now, reading those books when I was a student hit me like a flash of insight; rereading them feels like noticing again the air I breathe. For me, someone who has a working-class white upbringing not too different from Roediger's and who, like him, was shaped by--he says "saved by"--movements for labor, racial, and gender justice (p. 34), it's difficult for me to express adequately how much Roediger's work influences my thinking. Not only because we share life experiences, but because he's done the work to show how bosses and white supremacists can manipulate those experiences to perpetuate injustices and how white workers can also perpetuate them.

In perhaps the most compelling, and certainly the most feisty, chapter of *An Ordinary White* Roediger reviews the era when the critical study of whiteness, part of the larger field of ethnic studies, came to fruition. By the chapter's end, the feistiness mixes with mournfulness, given the current backlash to that body of work. Later, he summarizes the ideas he has consistently argued since his earliest publications: "That meaningful change comes from below, that there is no serious US study of class that does not also take full measure of race and gender, that the way to nonracialism is through the consideration of race--not around but through it--that we need more imagination and less polling data" (p. 215). Far be it from me to argue with how a person understands their own life's work, but I don't believe that summary, while correct, makes the best picture of why Roediger's work is worth reading and why reactionaries feel threatened by it.

Years ago I broke the spine of my copy of *The Wages of Whiteness*--so badly that now only the cover and a hair tie bind it--at page twelve, at the moment Roediger mentions Sterling Stuckey, Morrison, C. L. R. James, and Baldwin writing about "the white problem" and then cites Du Bois's description of the public and psychological wages of whiteness from *Black Reconstruction*. The idea that whites don't get hassled as much by cops; are assumed to be competent, even against evidence; have better schools and opportunities; and don't deal with the daily degradations that people of color endure is sufficiently well-rehearsed but still has explanatory power. What was a thread in *Black Reconstruction* and summarized late in the book in a particularly vibrant metaphor became the idea that motivates *The Wages of Whiteness* almost entirely. That's a fundamental move in a scholarly argument, but more humanly, it's a lovely example of the ties that bind readers and writers together, across generations, hopefully without end--more on that in a moment.

To my eye, most writers who have built upon Roediger's work emphasize the privileges of the wages of whiteness, rather than the detriments. It genuinely pains me that these conversations have often turned a ruthless criticism of existing whiteness into a weaker sauce, into what Devin Thomas O'Shea correctly calls, also in a review of *An Ordinary White*, "professional-managerial bric-a-brac," the result of which is that "Everyone feels guilty and angry about our failing systems, but no one gets a raise."

What makes Roediger's work worth reading is not just pointing out that the wages of whiteness, although substantial, are also spurious, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "Superficially resembling or simulating, but lacking the genuine character or qualities of, something; not true or genuine; false, sham, counterfeit." He builds from this, and from Baldwin, to remind readers that refusing the spurious wages of whiteness means holding out for something genuinely better--a richer, fuller, shared humanity, which is the last word of *An Ordinary White*. He writes, "It is knowledge--often incomplete, fleeting, and contradictory--of what whiteness separates whites from--a vital labor movement, an even rudimentary welfare state, a critique of empire and settler colonialism, meaningful planet-saving political coalitions, and humanity" (p. 219). Thinking about that problem is a better reason to read Roediger's work. It's a reason why white workers, but not only white workers, should strike a different path. It's also the key to why conservatives, not only in Arkansas, not only in supposedly enlightened but merely liberal college towns and larger cities, think that it's in their interests to keep people from hearing what Roediger has to say.

Censorship sometimes has a clumsy way of making people talk more about the ideas that censors would wish silenced. I hope that's the case here. Roediger writes that it "is now clearer than ever that the right understands the battle as precisely over the production and dissemination of knowledge about the racially unequal past and its impact on an unequal present" (p. 145). To be fair, I don't believe any of those Arkansas legislators know who Roediger is, so it's lucky for them to have university administrators think for them. But regardless of who does the censoring, the effect is the same: humanist scholarship is an eternal conversation, tying Du Bois to Morrison, Baldwin and Roediger, and to all of their many readers. Censorship attempts to break that tie, making it harder for working-class whites and everyone else to see ideas that Roediger insists are fathomable.

As of this writing, a person can get on the waiting list to check out *An Ordinary White* from the Central Arkansas Library System. Your library probably has a copy, too, although for how long is anyone's guess. Go read it.

Reviewer Bio:

Scott Henkel is an associate professor in the department of English at the University of Wyoming. He is a past president of the Working-Class Studies Association and is currently writing a book, *Oligarchy in America: Slavery, Democracy, and W. E. B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction*.