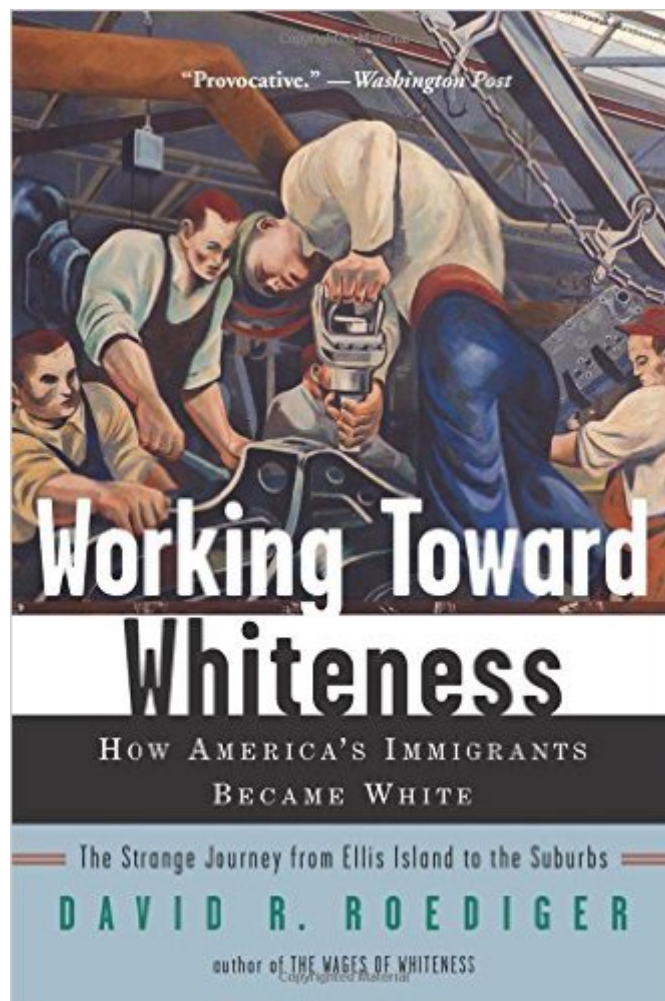


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# Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey From Ellis Island To The Suburbs



## Synopsis

At the vanguard of the study of race and labor in American history, David R. Roediger is the author of the now-classic *The Wages of Whiteness*, a study of racism in the development of a white working class in nineteenth-century America. In *Working Toward Whiteness*, he continues that history into the twentieth century. He recounts how American ethnic groups considered white today—including Jewish-, Italian-, and Polish-Americans—once occupied a confused racial status in their new country. They eventually became part of white America thanks to the nascent labor movement, New Deal reforms, and a rise in home-buying. From ethnic slurs to racially restrictive covenants—the racist real estate agreements that ensured all-white neighborhoods—Roediger explores the murky realities of race in twentieth-century America. A masterful history by an award-winning writer, *Working Toward Whiteness* charts the strange transformation of these new immigrants into the "white ethnics" of America today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

David Roediger has been toiling for years in the historical trenches, documenting the social construction of race. This is another solid entry in that category. It's not exhaustive, but compiles material on how Eastern and Southern European immigrants to the U.S. "became white." The category of "white people" is treated as a given, and as a constant in the U.S. today, but Roediger and others reveal the shifting meaning of the category, and the fight that various groups have waged to gain entry into the "white club" with its privileges. Just one example: the club was

established by the British, of course, and from their point of view the Irish were certainly not white. The ruling WASPs had the power to keep the Irish out, viewing them as practically subhuman, and it took the Irish many decades to fight their way in. So "white" is a marker of group boundary between the more and less powerful, pure and simple, a marker of division, not an inherent biological OR cultural category. One of the original works in this field was Ted Allen's THE INVENTION OF THE WHITE RACE. Noel Ignatiev, inspired by Allen, wrote HOW THE IRISH BECAME WHITE, and launched the journal RACE TRAITOR as well, with the slogan "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity." In the meantime, Roediger had emerged as a major voice in history, legitimating the line of research that led to Allen gaining a wider audience and Ignatiev writing his Ph.D. thesis. Another recent book that covers much of the same territory as WORKING TOWARD WHITENESS is WHITENESS OF A DIFFERENT COLOR by Matthew Frye Jacobson, which I highly recommend. Yet another valuable work in the field by a sociologist is THE ETHNIC MYTH: RACE, ETHNICITY AND CLASS IN AMERICA by Stephen Steinberg, which documents how ethnic/racial boundaries have been used to justify and enforce economic (class) subjugation in the U.S.

This is one of the finest sociological treatises on American immigration of a former "underclass"-working Whites from southern and eastern Europe who came to this country in droves between the 1880s and 1930s. Roediger presents a solid analytical framework for readers to use as a compass through the complex history and transformation of "foreigners" of the same color into "gradual natives" whose color is a badge of acceptable passage over time. Here we see Jews, Italians, Poles, Ukrainians and other "undesirables" sweat their way across factory floors, climb to academic heights, even get elected to high national offices beyond the dreams of their ancestors. The data are presented clearly; the interpretations are crisp and penetrating. Roediger does a great service to his subjects who happened to be "Americans in the making". A must study for any scholar of race and assimilation, and a good read for anyone interested in how some of us got to be "Americans" even with the wrong religions, national origins, or accents as impediments fueled by homegrown bigots of an earlier time!

As a teenager, one of the most common questions I heard on a regular basis was people of all racial/ethnic backgrounds asking "Are Italians white?" If only I could have given them a copy of David Roediger's Working Toward Whiteness for the full story on this matter...Roediger effectively demonstrates that racial categories are social/cultural constructions, and not inherent biological realities. Anyone who tries to argue otherwise simply needs to read this book first. Roediger

meticulously illustrates that "white" is not only NOT a biological category, but many of the people who Americans today regard as "white" (Jews, Italians, Slavs, Poles, Irishmen) were overwhelmingly regarded as members of "inferior races" who threatened "white" (Anglo-Saxon Protestant) America in the not-so-distant past. From 1900-1960, the meaning and conceptualization of "whiteness" underwent a dramatic transformation that came to include peoples of Eastern and Southern European descent. From the mines, sweatshops, and factories of America's cities at the beginning of the 20th century, Eastern European immigrants toiled and labored in a sort of racial/ethnic limbo in America where they occupied an intermediate status - clearly more socially desirable than blacks, Asians, or Mexicans, but clearly inferior to "Nordic" and "Anglo-Saxon" Americans of Northern European heritage and Protestant religious beliefs. Following World War II and the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, these peoples came to become "white ethnics" - fully accepted into the American mainstream. Roediger's book is a must-read to understand how this metamorphosis occurred. A great feature of this book is that it is NOT written in heavy, technical, academic jargon! A layperson will have no idea grasping the concepts and arguments in *Working Toward Whiteness*. Roediger is a hawk for detail, and this book is loaded with an incredible amount of small, intricate historical events that serve as wonderful illustrations of his larger points. For example: were you aware that Italian-Americans during the 1930s resisted "whites only" housing projects in South Philadelphia because they feared it would result in an influx of Jews, Greeks, and Irishmen into their neighborhoods? If you are a "white ethnic" yourself, interested in learning how racial categories came into being in American society, or just want to learn the true version of American history (that wasn't taught to you in school), then you owe it to yourself to read this outstanding and important work.

Roediger's book, *Working Towards Whiteness* helps to illuminate a gap in most American's historical knowledge, the shifting line of racial classification. While we often accept that current definition of race, including whiteness are givens, Roediger does a great job of laying out the process of how many European immigrants, while "white" wouldn't have been the beneficiaries of the privileges of "whiteness" they share in today. While we've got a long way to go towards being a fully inclusive country, we could make a great deal more headway towards that goal if people took the time to read this work.

Stunning!! It is impossible to understand race in America without reading the history outlined in this book.

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Rare topic well voiced.

Fantastic

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