



Events

Author David Roediger Discusses *How Race Survived U.S. History*

“How can you have Emancipation Proclamations and then have Jim Crow?” asked author David Roediger in an address to an OSU audience February 25. Roediger, author of *How Race Survived U.S. History*, was on campus for a Kirwan Institute lecture at the Frank Hale Jr. Black Culture Center which was co-sponsored by the Office of Minority Affairs and the Department of African American and African Studies.

Roediger, Kendrick C. Babcock Professor of History at the University of Illinois and a leading historian of race and labor, said that racism is probably not more than 250 years old. He describes how his latest book explores key points in history where society faced “some factor that ought to have done race in,” but instead, a racial divide persisted. Various chapters discuss how race came to be in the British and North American Colonies, how race survived capitalism and free labor, and how race survived New Deal and Civil Rights legislation.

Roediger gave examples showing even Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln were sometimes sympathetic to slavery. “Slavery expanded because of what Jefferson did with the Louisiana Purchase. It enormously involved the expansion of slavery. At the time of the Civil War, there were four million enslaved people in the United States.”

While Abraham Lincoln was viewed as “the Great Emancipator,” he actually took on a case in his private law practice to represent a slave owner trying to recover his slaves, who had been given safe harbor.

Racism turns on a view of bad and disapproving attitudes, a view of race as personal and attitudinal, he said. However, “It’s not that people had bad attitudes. People don’t proceed from bad attitudes; they proceed from bad practice.” While racial divisions in our country were created in order to run plantations, “Race is not just this human bad attitude that we’re all stuck with.” He described the idea of post-racialism as “the idea that eventually we’ll be over race – at least in its hideous forms.”

Now, in the face of President Obama’s election, there is discussion of the possibility of a post-racial society. “In the midst of the writing of the book, Obama took it over,” he said. “Obama’s victories began to chart a different kind of claim that race was changing. Young white people came to prefer Obama and his style.”

Because leaders are a product of their times, “Leaders will always make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make,” Roediger said. “The space we can create – or not – for Obama to lead, a lot of the work has to be very patient work.”