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Race and Class

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/us/adolph-reed-controversy.html?searchResultPosition=1>

A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury

The cancellation of a speech reflects an intense debate on the left: Is racism the primary problem in America today, or the outgrowth of a system that oppresses all poor people?

By [Michael Powell](#) Aug. 14, 2020

Adolph Reed is a son of the segregated South, a native of New Orleans who organized poor Black people and antiwar soldiers in the late 1960s and became a leading Socialist scholar at a trio of top universities.

Along the way, he acquired the conviction, controversial today, that the left is too focused on race and not enough on class. Lasting victories were achieved, he believed, when working class and poor people of all races fought shoulder to shoulder for their rights.

In late May, Professor Reed, now 73 and a professor emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, was invited to speak to the Democratic Socialists of America's New York City chapter. The match seemed a natural. Possessed of a barbed wit, the man who campaigned for Senator Bernie Sanders and skewered President Barack Obama as a man of "vacuous to repressive neoliberal politics" would address the D.S.A.'s largest chapter, the crucible that gave rise to Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and a new generation of leftist activism.

His chosen topic was unsparing: He planned to argue that the left's intense focus on the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on Black people undermined multiracial organizing, which he sees as key to health and economic justice.

Notices went up. Anger built. How could we invite a man to speak, members asked, who downplays racism in a time of plague and protest? To let him talk, the organization's Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus stated, was "reactionary, class reductionist and at best, tone deaf."

"We cannot be afraid to discuss race and racism because it could get mishandled by racists," the caucus stated. "That's cowardly and cedes power to the racial capitalists."

Amid murmurs that opponents might crash his Zoom talk, Professor Reed and D.S.A. leaders agreed to cancel it, a striking moment as perhaps the nation's most powerful Socialist organization rejected a Black Marxist professor's talk because of his views on race.

"God have mercy, Adolph is the greatest democratic theorist of his generation," said Cornel West, a Harvard professor of philosophy and a Socialist. "He has taken some very unpopular stands on identity politics, but he has a track record of a half-century. If you give up discussion, your movement moves toward narrowness."

The decision to silence Professor Reed came as Americans debate the role of race and racism in policing, health care, media and corporations. Often pushed aside in that discourse are those leftists and liberals who have argued there is too much focus on race and not enough on class in a deeply unequal society. Professor Reed is part of the class of historians, political scientists and intellectuals who argue that race as a construct is overstated.

This debate is particularly potent as activists sense a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make progress on issues ranging from police violence to mass incarceration to health and inequality. And it comes as Socialism in America — long a predominantly white movement — attracts younger and more diverse adherents.

Many leftist and liberal scholars argue that current disparities in health, police brutality and wealth inequality are due primarily to the nation's history of racism and white supremacy. Race is America's primal wound, they say, and Black people, after centuries of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, should take the lead in a multiracial fight to dismantle it. To set that battle aside in pursuit of ephemeral class solidarity is preposterous, they argue.

"Adolph Reed and his ilk believe that if we talk about race too much we will alienate too many, and that will keep us from building a movement," said Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a Princeton professor of African-American studies and a D.S.A. member. "We don't want that — we want to win white people to an understanding of how their racism has fundamentally distorted the lives of Black people."

A contrary view is offered by Professor Reed and some prominent scholars and activists, many of whom are Black. They see the current emphasis in the culture on race-based politics as a dead-end. They include Dr. West; the historians Barbara Fields of Columbia University and Toure Reed — Adolph's son — of Illinois State; and Bhaskar Sunkara, founder of Jacobin, a Socialist magazine.

They readily accept the brute reality of America's racial history and of racism's toll. They argue, however, that the problems now bedeviling America — such as wealth inequality, police brutality and mass incarceration — affect Black and brown Americans, but also large numbers of working class and poor white Americans.

The most powerful progressive movements, they say, take root in the fight for universal programs. That was true of the laws that empowered labor organizing and established mass jobs programs during the New Deal, and it's true of the current struggles for free public college tuition, a higher minimum wage, reworked police forces and single-payer health care.

Those programs would disproportionately help Black, Latino and Native American people, who on average have less family wealth and suffer ill health at rates exceeding that of white Americans, Professor Reed and his allies argue. To fixate on race risks dividing a potentially powerful coalition and playing into the hands of conservatives.

"An obsession with disparities of race has colonized the thinking of left and liberal types," Professor Reed told me. "There's this insistence that race and racism are fundamental determinants of all Black people's existence."

These battles are not new: In the late 19th century, Socialists wrestled with their own racism and debated the extent to which they should try to build a multiracial organization. Eugene Debs, who ran for president five times, was muscular in his insistence [that his party advocate](#) racial equality. Similar questions roiled the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s.

But the debate has been reignited by the spread of the deadly virus and the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. And it has taken on a generational tone, as Socialism — in the 1980s largely the redoubt of aging leftists — now attracts many younger people eager to reshape organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America, which has existed in various permutations since the 1920s. (A Gallup poll late last year found that Socialism is now as popular as capitalism among people aged 18 to 39.)

The D.S.A. now has more than 70,000 members nationally and 5,800 in New York — and their average age now hovers in the early 30s. While the party is much smaller than, say, Democrats and Republicans, it has become an unlikely kingmaker, helping fuel the victories of Democratic Party candidates such as Ms. Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, who beat a longtime Democratic incumbent in a June primary.

In years past, the D.S.A. had welcomed Professor Reed as a speaker. But younger members, chafing at their Covid-19 isolation and throwing themselves into “Defund the Police” and anti-Trump protests, were angered to learn of the invitation extended to him.

“People have very strong concerns,” Chi Anunwa, co-chair of D.S.A.’s New York chapter, said on a Zoom call. They said “the talk was too dismissive of racial disparities at a very tense point in American life.”

Professor Taylor of Princeton said Professor Reed should have known his planned talk on Covid-19 and the dangers of obsessing about racial disparities would register as “a provocation. It was quite incendiary.”

None of this surprised Professor Reed, who sardonically described it as a “tempest in a demitasse.” Some on the left, he said, have a “militant objection to thinking analytically.”

Professor Reed is an intellectual duelist, who especially enjoys lancing liberals he sees as too cozy with corporate interests. He wrote that President Bill Clinton and his liberal followers showed a “willingness to sacrifice the poor and to tout it as tough-minded compassion” and described former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. as a man whose “tender mercies have been reserved for the banking and credit card industries.”

He finds a certain humor in being attacked over race.

“I’ve never led with my biography, as that’s become an authenticity-claiming gesture,” he said. “But when my opponents say that I don’t accept that racism is real, I think to myself, ‘OK, we’ve arrived at a strange place.’”

Professor Reed and his compatriots believe the left too often ensnares itself in battles over racial symbols, from statues to language, rather than keeping its eye on fundamental economic change.

“If I said to you, ‘You’re laid off, but we’ve managed to rename Yale to the name of another white person’, you would look at me like I’m crazy,” said Mr. Sunkara, the editor of Jacobin.

Better, they argue, to talk of commonalities. While there is a vast wealth gap between [Black and white Americans, poor and working-class white people are remarkably similar to poor and working-class Black people when](#) it comes to income and wealth, which is to say they possess very little of either. Democratic Party politicians, Professor Reed and his allies say, wield race as a dodge to avoid grappling with big economic issues that cut deeper, such as wealth redistribution, as that would upset their base of rich donors.

“Liberals use identity politics and race as a way to counter calls for redistributive policies,” noted Toure Reed, whose book “Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism” tackles these subjects.

Some on the left counter that Professor Reed and his allies ignore that a strong emphasis on race is not only good politics but also common sense organizing.

“Not only do Black people suffer class oppression,” said Professor Taylor of Princeton, “they also suffer racial oppression. They are fundamentally more marginalized than white people.

“How do we get in the door without talking race and racism?”

I put that question to Professor Reed. The son of itinerant, radical academics, he passed much of his boyhood in New Orleans. “I came back and forth into the Jim Crow South and developed a special hatred for that system,” he said.

Yet even as he has taken pleasure of late as New Orleans removed memorials to the old Confederacy, he preferred a different symbolism. He recalled, as a boy, traveling to small New England towns and walking through cemeteries and seeing moss-covered tombstones marking the graves of young white men who had died in service of the Union.

“I got this warm feeling reading those tombstones, ‘So-and-so died so that all men could be free,’” he said. “There was something so damned moving about that.”