

Race versus Class in a Capitalist Society

SECTION ONE

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

By [Michael Powell](#), 2020, *New York Times*

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/us/adolph-reed-controversy.html?smid=em-share>

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?

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.



Adolph Reed teaching a class at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is now a professor emeritus, in April 2019.

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.”

SECTION TWO

Martin Luther King's forgotten legacy? His fight for economic justice

By [Michael K Honey](#)

SOURCE: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/martin-luther-king-50th-anniversary->

The King we rarely talk about fought to remake America's political and economic system from the ground up

Fifty years after he was assassinated in [Memphis](#), how should we remember Martin Luther King Jr?

Popular treatments primarily portray him through his magnificent I Have a Dream speech, delivered before the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. King called on America to live up to its historic ideals of equal rights in which all people would be defined by the "content of their character" and not the color of their skin.

Twenty-three years later, Congress declared King's birthday a national holiday, the first one added to the calendar since Memorial Day in 1947. Since then, school assemblies and civic gatherings have often remembered King as an "icon" for color-blind democracy.

This way of [remembering King](#) appeals to a politically diverse audience, including advertisers, educators, the mass media and elected officials. The King holiday helps us to imagine the best kind of country we could be and makes us proud to be Americans. Yet most people misremember King and his historical context.

One major failing in how we remember King "is our typing of him as a civil rights leader," the activist and pastor James Lawson says. "We do not type him as a pastor, prophet, theologian, scholar, preacher ... and that allows conventional minds across the country to thereby stereotype him and eliminate him from an overall analysis of our society."

But King offered just such an analysis. People know him as a [civil rights advocate](#), but he also waged a lifelong struggle for economic justice and the empowerment of poor and working-class people of all colors.

King early on described himself as a "profound advocate of the social gospel" who decried a capitalist system that put profits and property rights ahead of basic human rights. Beyond his dream of civil and voting rights lay a demand that every person have adequate food, education, housing, a decent job and income.

Ultimately, his was a more revolutionary quest for a nonviolent society beyond racism, poverty and war.

"There is no intrinsic difference" between workers, King told the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), one of America's most important trade unions, in 1963. Skin color and ethnicity should not divide those who work for a living, he said.

"Economic justice," King went on, required "a land where men will not take necessities to give luxuries to the few," and "where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity."

That same year, King was calling on President John F Kennedy to honor the emancipation of African Americans from slavery one hundred years before. There ought, King said, to be a new freedom agenda.

This agenda was not only about civil rights. The 28 August demonstration that culminated in King's I Have a Dream speech was publicized as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was the result of many years of organizing by black workers and their unions.

In his speech, King said the nation had given former slaves a "bad check" – a promise of freedom that had not materialized. Generations later, his dream was not only for equal rights but also for a substantive change in people's economic and social conditions.

Over the next two years, the country's adoption of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act completed a "first phase" of the freedom movement, King said. Now he wanted a "second phase" struggle for "economic equality", so that everyone could have a well-paying job or a basic level of income, along with decent levels of healthcare, education and housing.

Then, in October 1966, 100,000 copies of a booklet called A Freedom Budget for All Americans, with an introduction by King, were distributed by the unions. The Freedom Budget proposed a second New Deal to promote job growth at living wages through public spending on social goods.



People gather at the end of the Poor People March on 19 June 1968 in Washington DC.

In the months before he travelled to Memphis in 1968 to participate in a garbage-workers' strike and was [assassinated](#), King had been criss-crossing the country for weeks, promoting a multi-racial coalition to pressure Congress to reallocate money from the Vietnam war to money for human needs.

King called it the Poor People's Campaign, and it promoted an "economic bill of rights for all Americans", which included five pillars: a meaningful job at a living wage; a secure and adequate income; access to land; access to capital, especially for poor people and minorities; and the ability for ordinary people to "play a truly significant role" in the government.

It was, King said, a "last ditch" effort to save America from the interrelated evils of racism, poverty and war.

Historians constantly search for and reshape our knowledge of the past, often based on the challenges they face in their own times. Although public awareness often focuses on King's "first phase" of the movement, for civil and voting rights, we now have a plethora of scholarship that sees the "radical" King as "an inconvenient hero" who led a movement beyond civil rights to more fundamental economic and social change.

In our own time, when "everything decent and fair in American life" is under threat, as King said it was in his time, we might do well to remember his fight for economic justice as part of King's dream for a better America that was all encompassing.

Remembering King's [unfinished fight](#) for economic justice, broadly conceived, might help us to better understand the relevance of his legacy to us today. It might help us to realize that King's moral discourse about the gap between the "haves and the have-nots" resulted from his role in the labor movement as well as in the civil rights movement.

In addition to remembering the eloquent man in a suit and tie at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, we should also remember King as a man sometimes dressed in blue jeans marching on the streets and sitting in jail cells, or as an impassioned man rousing workers at union conventions and on union picket lines.

We must also remember him as a man of nonviolence often surrounded by violent police and screaming mobs, and at times physically assaulted by white racists.

The nation may [honor him now](#), but we should also remember the rightwing crusade against him in his own time as he sought just alternatives to America's exploitative racial capitalism.

How we remember King matters. It helps us to see where we have been and to understand King's unfinished agenda for our own times.

- *Adapted from [To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice](#) by Michael K Honey. Copyright © 2018 by Michael K Honey. With permission of the publisher, WW Norton, Inc. All rights reserved*