

Adolph Reed on Sanders, Coates, and Reparations



The following is a segment from Doug Henwood's Behind the News, January 21, 2016. Henwood is interviewing Adolph Reed. Audio link here.

DH: We've got Ta-Nehisi Coates citing the call for reparations and finding Sanders guilty of hostility towards reparations. What do you think of his critique?

AR: I read the thing in *The Atlantic* and it's so utterly empty and beside the point, I can't even characterize it.

You can go down Sanders's platform issue by issue and ask, "so how is this not a black issue?" How is a \$15 minimum wage not a black issue? How is massive public works employment not a black issue. How is free public college higher education not a black issue. The criminal justice stuff and all the rest of it. So one head scratching aspect of this is what do people like Coates imagine is to be gained by calling the redistribution program racial and calling it "reparations"?

The charitable or benign interpretation of what he and others imagine the power of this rhetoric to be, is that there is something cathartic about it like Black Power. I'm thinking for instance of "say Black Lives Matter" or "say Sandra Bland's name." It's like the demand to call it reparations, which doesn't seem to make any sense whatsoever. It doesn't

add anything to calls for redistribution. If anything, it could undercut them. Since there's nothing (less) solidaristic than demanding a designer type program that will redistribute only to one's own group and claim that that group (especially when times are getting tougher and economic insecurity is deepening for everybody) it seems like it's guaranteed not to get off the ground and seems almost like a police action.

DH: I'm not Ta-Nehisi Coates but I imagine he and others favoring reparations would respond by saying that it's meant to address wounds that were specifically racial in their origin.

AR: The logic fails on its own terms. If you grant for the sake of argument that the injuries were highly and explicitly racialized, it does not follow from that that the remedy needs to be of the same coin. And I have not seen Coates or others who make that assertion actually argue for it, i.e. give a concrete and pragmatic explanation of how (the remedy is supposed to) work. That is to say, what the response, or atonement, I suppose, for past harms would look like and what they imagine the response would actually be.

Coates makes this stuff up as he goes along: by his own account, he read Baldwin and wanted to write like Baldwin and his editor would check him and say "Look, you're writing these passages which don't mean anything whatsoever" since he was so focussed on wanting to write like Baldwin absent having anything in particular to say.

So the first question for me has always been how can you imagine putting together a political alliance that would be capable of prevailing on this issue. And what you get in response is a lot of "What black people deserve" because of the harms that have been done to them. I just think it's fundamentally unserious politically.

But I'll say this and I'll say this as a Sanders

supporter—I'll come clean on that. The idea that Bernie Sanders becomes the target of race-line activists now, and not Hillary Clinton, is just beyond me and it smells. It smells to high heaven.

You might say, well, she's not the one who pushed through NAFTA or signed the omnibus crime bill, or ended the federal government's commitment to direct provision of income support or housing that her husband did. But she supported all that stuff then. My mind is blown by the understanding of politics that undergirds this perspective that people like Coates and proud TFA alum Deray McKesson and holy roller Marissa Johnson and all those others embrace. It's fundamentally anti-left. The only thing you can say is that this is a class program. That this is a program that expresses and connects with the interests, or the world view, if not interests-although they do come together-of an aspiring or upwardly mobile stratum of the black and other colored PMC (professional managerial class) that scoffs and sneers at programs of material redistribution.

When I was working in the GI movement, when people like that would come into the meeting, I'd just ask them "So which branch of military intelligence are you assigned to?"

DH: This sort of stuff plays very well to guilty white liberals doesn't it.

AR: Yeah, well, a friend, whom I won't out, observed to me a while ago that one of the things that really irks him (and he's a professor) about Coates is the way that white liberals gush over him and my informant said that it reminds him of the way that upper middle class liberals fawn over the maid's son who has gone to college and "made something of himself."

DH: That's pretty harsh.

AR: Yeah, but there's a lot to it because, it comes back to this question: why should anyone pay any attention to anything

this guy says?

DH: Well he has a “literary writing style” that appeals to certain populations.

AR: Right. I understand that and that it’s absolutely divorced from content except for this funny sort of fake Candide like thing of “I’m just astounded that white people read me.” It just all feels tawdry and evasive and cheap.

I’ve heard some people argue that it strengthens the case for affirmative action but I think it does the opposite, since reparations is really affirmative action on steroids. I can imagine going to talk to a long displaced steel worker in Western Pennsylvania whose fretting now about further increase in economic insecurity around the fracking stuff. And you’re going to explain to him or her that because of slavery they’ve got to be on the giving end of some transfer payments that will go to recompense blacks for harms done in the past.

Again, some of this stuff really feels like a moral panic and the moral panic aspect of it, it seems to me, converges on the class perspective. And the career aspirations. Don’t forget that. And that leads us where we are.

DH: Coates and lots of his supporters would say that what you are arguing is for a class based politics that’s blind to the injuries of race and the enduring damage of racism. What do you say to that?

AR: I say that their race first politics *is* a class politics. It’s not an alternative to class politics it’s a politics of a different class. It’s not a working-class politics, it’s an aspiring PMC politics that’s hinged in material terms ultimately on race relations administration as a career path. There’s a multi-billion dollar diversity industry now—it might be interesting to have Ken Warren on and talk about that since he did a three year tour as a Deputy Provost for Diversity at the University of Chicago and made deep penetrations behind

the lines of the corporate diversity industry.

DH: One of the points you made in your *Progressive* piece back in 2002 was that whenever universal class-based politics rears its head, the reparations call pops up. One doesn't want to get too conspiratorial about this but what were you thinking of?

AR: I was out of the country for a while back then and hadn't paid much attention and the reparations thing had blown way up while I was away—there were conferences all over C-Span—Ron Karenga, Kimberly Crenshaw and Charles Ogletree. Because it's the kind of thing that lawyers dine on. I was bemused. I couldn't figure out what was going on. When (James) Foreman and the Black Manifesto group raised the reparations issue back in the '60s, it was connected with something like the freedom budget and what Whitney Young had described as a Marshall Plan for the ghetto, so in that sense reparations was a hook which expressed Foreman's cleverness and engagement with the soap-box nationalists up in Harlem who had been talking about that stuff for a long time.

It seemed to me that clearly was a response or an alternative to the possibility that a more universally, class based redistributive agenda would gain currency. Part of the problem, and I think this is a big chunk of the appeal of reparations since 1965 and into the 1970s, is that it appeals to people whose political commitments is to maintain the centrality of a racial interpretation of every form of inequality or injustice that affects black people. So the commitment is to a race politics. And so the race politics could be challenged by what they imagine to be post-racial politics (which nobody other than them has ever talked about, anyway) and by a class politics.

What the race discourse does is it forces a racial interpretation onto any manifestation of inequality or injustice to be associated with black people on the receiving

end. So in that sense, the demands aren't even that important. The discussion of the program isn't even that important. The real objective is to maintain the dominance of the racist interpretive frame of reference and that goes back to my contention that this is a class program because part of the material foundation of the class has been, since the class began to take shape at the end of the 19th century, a claim to be representatives of the aspirations of and of the voice of black people writ large.

DH: And not to get too conspiratorial about this, but it seems like people like Fred Hampton and Martin Luther King, people who talk about non-racial analyses of capitalism and cross-racial alliances against it, end up dead. And people like Karenga and Assante end up doing pretty well for themselves. Is that just an accident or should I be concerned about this?

AR: Well, I'm not sure about Assante but we know that Karenga knew his way to the offices of the authorities and their phone numbers. And it's easy to throw around charges of his being an agent because he acts like an agent-and we all know where that leads. But having said all that, that strain of nationalist-I sometimes think of it as a Duvalierist politics-has always been capable of making alliances with the most dangerous and reprehensible elements of the opposition: Garvey and the Klan, Elijah Muhammed and the Klan, Floyd McKissick and Roy Innis and other Black Power nationalists who created Black Americans for a Responsible Two Party system, or as the rest of us called it, "Negroes for Nixon."

And they all gave the same line: all white people are racist. It's foolish to try to make distinctions among them based on principle and on politics, we have to be pragmatic and align ourselves with whichever ones of them are going to do something for black people and that formulation of course is an instantiation of the famous slippage between first person singular and plural that's a characteristic of nationalist ideologies no matter where you find them.

DH: I remember an old slogan, “Black and White Unite and Fight”: a pretty good guideline to political action?

AR: Look, it doesn't need to be Kumbaya. It's practical—if you assume that the interests and the structures which generate inequality, dispossession and misery are not amenable to the petitions to the enlightened ruling class from one section of the oppressed, then the only way we're going to be able to make anyone's life better is to change the terms of political debate. And we can only do that on the basis of common experience and the most broadly shared experience is that of those who work for a living or are expected to work for a living. And I don't see how we can get to any sort of a better world going through any other route. And we certainly can't do it by hanging out, like McKesson and John Legend-in-his-own-mind with the Broad Foundation and Bruce Rauner and TFA and people like that.

There's a sense in which these people are the black shock troops for neoliberalism.