

“Reinventing the past to suit the purposes of the present”

An interview with political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr. on the New York Times’ 1619 Project

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Adolph Reed, Jr., is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of numerous books and articles dealing with race and class in American society and writes regularly for the New Republic.

Q. Could you say something about your background and what you view to be the main thrust of your career?

A. I’m one of those people who was largely formed through the social movements of the 1960s. The only modification to that was that I came out of a left-wing household, and so I was kind of looking to be formed and was always more attentive to politics than anybody in my cohort. One of the reasons I made the decision to go to graduate school when I did, in the 1970s, was that I could feel that the Movement was kind of drying up around us. The opportunities that there seemed to have been for left interventions were disappearing, especially within black politics, because that was the domain I was operating in after I left college in 1969. The challenge as I saw it when I went to grad school in 1972 was to figure out how we’ve gotten outflanked by petty-bourgeois politicians and how to do it better next time. So, I went to graduate school without a sense that there was a clear boundary between my political concerns and interests and my intellectual concerns and interests.

One of the reasons I think it is kind of hard to look back on that now is that something quite different has happened over the last 30 years, and that’s been the cultural turn in academia. One of its ironic entailments is this notion that doing cultural work in academia itself is a form of political practice, and that advancing certain programmatic and intellectual interests within the Academy or in bourgeois public discourse is simultaneously a political practice and an intellectual practice.

That mindset brings to mind Marx’s critique of Proudhon, where he pointed out that in Germany, where they didn’t know political economy, Proudhon presented himself as a political economist, and in France, where they didn’t know philosophy, he presented himself as a philosopher. It’s like a character from *Amos and Andy* or *The Life of Riley* where the character’s expertise is always in another place. But this is also a marker of the extent to which academia is one of the last strongholds of the professional and managerial class.

What I’ve strived for throughout my career is to provide a historical materialist account of race and class, and American society. One of the major problems I combat is the idea of class as culture. Looking back at the first two decades after World War II, one of the most meaningful but damaging interventions that American social scientists made during that period is rendering class invisible by reconstructing it as a category of culture.

Q. Let me ask a little bit about your initial reaction to the 1619 Project. I

have spoken to several historians who concentrated their criticism on Nikole Hannah-Jones’ lead essay, which is meant to frame the whole thing, and also Matthew Desmond’s claim that American capitalism is basically the direct descendent of chattel slavery. Maybe you can help us to understand the rest of the magazine, which is being pushed as a curriculum for school children. It seems to me that what the rest of the essays do is focus on a particular social problem—traffic jams in Atlanta, lack of national healthcare, high sugar in the American diet, and so on—and argue by implication that that’s all coming out of slavery. The dominant tendency in academia is to attribute all social problems to race, or to other forms of identity, but the 1619 Project goes farther still, saying that they are all rooted in slavery.

A. I didn’t know about the 1619 Project until it came out, and frankly when I learned about it my reaction was a big sigh. But again, the relation to history has passed to the appropriation of the past in support of what whatever kind of ‘just-so’ stories about the present are desired. This approach has taken root within the Academy. It’s like all bets are off.

Merlin Chowkwanyun [1] and I did an article a few years ago in the *Socialist Register* that’s a critique of disparitarianism in the social sciences, by which this or that disparity has replaced the study of inequality and its effects. As Walter Benn Michaels [2] said, and as I have said time and time again, if anti-disparitarianism is your ideology, then for you a society qualifies as being just if 1 percent of the population controls 90 percent of the wealth, so long as that within that 1 percent 12 percent or so are black, etc., reflecting their share of the national population. This is the ideal of social justice for neoliberalism. There’s no question of actual redistribution.

What are the stakes that people imagine to be bound up with demonstrating that capitalism in this country emerged from slavery and racism, which are treated as two different labels for the same pathology? Ultimately, it’s a race reductionist argument. What the Afro-pessimist types or black nationalist types get out of it is an insistence that we can’t ever talk about anything except race. And that’s partly because talking about race is the things they have to sell.

If you follow through the logic of disparities discourse, and watch the studies and follow the citations, what you get is a sort of bold announcement of findings, but finding that anybody who has been reading a newspaper over the last 50 or 70 years would assume from the outset: blacks have it worse, and women have it worse, and so on.

It’s in part an expression of a generic pathology of sociology, the most banal expression of academic life. You follow the safe path. You replicate the findings. But it’s not just supposed to be a matter of finding a disparity in and of itself, like differences in the number of days of

sunshine in a year. It's supposed to be a promise that in finding or confirming the disparity in this or that domain that it will bring some kind of mediation of the problem. But the work never calls for that.

Q. You make important points about the way social problems are approached. As an example, we have a scourge of police violence in this country. Over 1,000 Americans are killed each year by police. And the common knowledge, so to speak, is that this is a racial problem. The reality is that the largest number of those killed are white, but blacks are disproportionately killed. But if the position is that this is simply a racial problem, there is no real solution on offer. We have a militarized police force operating under conditions of extreme social inequality, with lots of guns on the streets, with soldiers coming back from serving in neocolonial wars abroad becoming police officers. And all of this is excised in the racist argument, which if taken at face value, boils down to allegations about racial attitudes among police.

A. Cedric Johnson [3] has made good points on this and I've spoken with him at considerable length about the criminal justice system. To overdraw the point, a black Yale graduate who works on Wall Street is no doubt several times more likely to be jacked up by the police on the platform of Metro North than his white counterpart, out of mistaken identity. And that mistaken identity is what we might call racism. But it's a shorthand. He's still less likely to be jacked up by the police than the broke white guy in northeast Philadelphia or west Baltimore.

The point of this stress on policing is containing those working-class and poor populations and protecting property holders downtown, and in making shows of force in doing so. I mean the emergence of, or the intensification of, militarized policing in the 1990s and 2000s was directly connected with an increased focus on urban redevelopment directed toward turning central cities into havens for play and leisure. To do this you have to accomplish a couple of things, as Saskia Sassen pointed out almost 30 years ago, in the reconfiguration of the urban political economy in ways that create a basis for upscale consumption, and an industrial reserve army who will work for little enough to make that culture of upscale consumption profitable. Then you have to have the police to protect all of this. It's really like a tourist economy.

So that's kind of natural enough and you don't need to have a devil theory like the crack epidemic to explain it—all of this pointless back-and-forth about how the cultural and political authorities are responding to the opioid crisis compared to how they responded to the crack epidemic. I mean, it's all beside the point.

Q. I was remembering your response to Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans is your hometown, right?

A. Yes.

Q. Maybe you could say something about that because I think you made a strong critique of identity politics in the context of that disaster.

A. First of all, the narrative that only black people lived in the most flood-prone areas was false. The Lakeview section of the city, which was built on reclaimed marshland on the lakefront when I was too small to remember, in the first decades after World War II, was every bit as much below sea level as the Lower Ninth Ward and flooded as completely.

I guess we owe something to Anderson Cooper and Soledad O'Brien for when they began to recoil from, and then eventually to rebel against, the victim-blaming in the aftermath of the hurricane. But what was unfortunate about that moment was that, even though they were moved by it, the power of the iconography, of the disproportionate representation of poor black people on the overpasses in the Convention Center and the Superdome, fed this idea that "nothing has changed," that there is this insoluble race problem.

Well the first question is, where do you think that the people who brought you those tropical drinks and turned down your bed in the hotel lived? I mean how do you think they lived? Did it never occur to you to wonder what their wages were or anything like that?

Of course it's a poor city. But it turns out that, proportionally, blacks weren't displaced at a higher rate than whites. It's just that there are a lot more blacks in the city. And also blacks actually didn't die at a higher rate than whites. But the best predictor, or a better predictor than race, of who was able to evacuate first of all, who was able to survive the period of evacuation under relatively decent circumstances, and who was able to come back to the city afterwards—every step along the way, class was a better predictor than race. Class as in a sociological sense, class as access to resources—both monetary and other resources; your lack of dependence on a job, your access to social networks. But it didn't appear to be that way so there becomes this narrative that the story of Katrina's displacement proves the continuing significance, or new significance, of race.

Well, it turns out that the concrete version of the story is that it shows the power of class and the impact of neoliberalism. Before Mitch Landrieu was elected mayor in 2010 there hadn't been a white mayor since his father left office in 1977. So you had a black government all the way through. But now even with the coming back to the city, for a year or two afterwards, when you'd drive around the city—and granted this is informal observation, but I did it on every trip there and kept tabs—but following the recovery it's not only that the more affluent neighborhoods recovered without regard to race, but that even within the better-off neighborhoods and more affluent blocks, the bigger houses came back first.

But where it really gets corrosive is this narrative that the city was being depopulated of blacks so that whites could take it back. And the first few weeks after the inundation you could certainly find people saying, "We'll get rid of the crime. Let it all go to Houston." But it was also pretty clear after a few weeks that the governing elite didn't really have any interest in altering the political regime. Now post-Katrina, and this is a big irony given the race line of arguing, if anything the ruling class in the city is now more seamlessly interracial and biracial than it had been previously.

Q. I think identity politics makes for some strange bedfellows. There's some agreement between the likes of Hannah-Jones and the far right, for example the neo-Confederates you were mentioning when we sat down, who oppose the concept of equality. But she, in the 1619 Project, also calls the Declaration of Independence a "founding myth."

A. Every state is going to have its founding myths, if you think of them as ideals. But what is so important about Jim Oakes' book, *Scorpion's Sting*, is that you can see this tension about human equality that was rooted in the founding documents and debates. It's especially ironic to consider, for instance, the three-fifths compromise to the Constitution, which was an expression of exactly the opposite political value that the people who invoke it as part of an Afro-pessimist discourse claim. These people are kind of just making it up as they go, or reinventing the past to suit the purposes of the present.

Right from the outset. Those first 20 people weren't slaves. There wasn't chattel slavery yet in British North America. But the 1619 Project assumes, in whatever way, that slavery was the natural condition of Africans. And that's where the Afro-pessimist types wind up sharing a cup of tea with the likes of James Henry Hammond. [4]

Q. Let me ask you about what in academia is called "critical race theory" and how you see it at work in the 1619 Project.

A. It's another expression of reductionism. On the most pedestrian level it's an observation that what you see is a function of where you stand. At that level there's nothing in it that wasn't in Marx's early writings, or in Mannheim. But then you get an appropriation of the standpoint theory for identity that says for example, all blacks think the same way. It's taxonomic, a reification. So the retort to that critique has been "intersectionality." Yes, there's a black perspective, but what you do is fragment it, so there are multiple black perspectives, because each potential—or each sacralized—social position becomes discrete. That's what gives you intersectionality.

But listening to how people talk about intersectionality, it just seems like dissociative personality disorder. How do you carve out when your male is talking, and your black is talking, and when your steelworker is talking? It seems like the kind of perspective that can work only at a level of abstraction at which no one ever asks to see something concrete. Herbert Butterfield, in *The Whig Interpretation of History*, back in 1931, had this great criticism of what he calls concepts that are incapable of concrete visualization. But we have this world of theory where big cultural abstractions kind of cross-pollinate and relieve the theorists of historical work.

Q. We've spoken to a number of leading historians, including James McPherson, James Oakes, Gordon Wood and Victoria Bynum, and Hannah-Jones launched into a Twitter tirade against them, dismissing them as "white historians." She is not a historian, but she is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," just like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram X. Kendi have been in recent years.

A. I have spent most of my adult life trying to avoid the kind of old-fashioned Stalinist conspiracy theory, but it's getting hard. My dad used to say that in one sense ideology is the mechanism that harmonizes the principles that you want to believe with what advances your material interest.

And so I understand that the people of MacArthur, for instance, think they're doing something quite different. But when they look for voices, the voices that they look for are the voices that say ultimately, "Well it's a tragedy that's hopeless. We have to atone as individuals. Do whatever you can do to confront disparity."

I've been joking for a number of years that here at Penn the university administration has three core values: Building the endowment, already at \$16 billion. Buying up as much on the real estate as they can on both sides of the Schuylkill River. And diversity. And they're genuinely committed to all three of those because they think that part of their mission is to make the ruling class look like the photo of America.

I made a reference once to Coates being an autodidact, and what I meant by that was that he did not know history, that he's not a historian. Kendi's book, I don't know anyone who has actually read it.

Q. *Stamped from the Beginning* is the title. There couldn't be a more anti-historical title. In just four words it mixes biblical and genetic metaphors. He's now on a national speaking tour.

A. It's a career path. A number of years ago Ken Warren at the University of Chicago and I ran a seminar, and what we noticed is that a lot of students of color were applying to PhD programs saying that they wanted to get a credential to help them become public intellectuals. And it's only gotten more and more normalized. I mean at this point like if you look at faculty home pages, or even graduate student pages, they read like they're prepared by the William Morris Agency, for example assistant professors claiming 15 subfields of expertise. It's like the bios are written for MSNBC.

Q. I think one element of it is that there's this presumption that it's somehow all "left." But then you look, and well it's funded by the MacArthur Foundation, and the *New York Times* loves it, and the Ivy League boards of trustees loves it, so how left can it be? How could it possibly be radical?

A. I've seen some students take umbrage to describing slavery as a labor system, that that is somehow demeaning. I don't know if you remember this, but there was a controversy a few years ago where this textbook made a reference to the transatlantic slave trade, and then, in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, made a statement that Africans were brought to the New World to work, or were brought as workers. There was a big to-do about this. But the simple structure of the paragraph makes clear that whoever wrote this text was not claiming that African workers weren't slaves, since they were brought here through the transatlantic slave trade. My son Touré Reed, who is a historian at Illinois

State University, puts it this way, "There is a tendency to think of slavery as a permanent sadistic camp." And that's what comes through in the movies, too.

Q. Right. The idea, and I think the 1619 Project very much promotes this, that slavery was created as a form of racial oppression, rather than a form of labor exploitation that ultimately became rationalized ideologically by racism.

Even when slavery existed, its form of exploitation was so conspicuous, and so brutal, that it obscured other forms of exploitation, including wage labor. But now it's 2019, and you have the *New York Times* arguing that every social ill that we have today is descended directly from slavery. As if wage labor exploitation hasn't happened, as if it's not happening at the *Times* itself. As if the great majority of African Americans today are not exploited today as wage laborers, alongside whites.

A. Right. I've had this argument with the proponents of reparations. And my question for them all along has been, how can you imagine putting together a political alliance that would be broad enough so that you win on this issue? And if you can't imagine it, then what are you really doing? And their answer is, "Well, don't you think black people deserve something?" Well, a lot of people deserve a lot.

Q. I agree. The people behind the 1619 Project would of course deny they're advocating a race war. But if blacks and white have immutable, intrinsic, and supra-historical differences, that's the logic of the position.

A. That's also the punchline of Afro-pessimism, that racism is ubiquitous. That everybody hates blacks or embraces anti-blackness. It's everywhere and there's this global condition of whiteness.

Q. Hannah-Jones writes that anti-black racism is stamped in the national DNA.

A. The only place that can lead, if it's impermeable, if it's immutable, is race war.

The "legacy of slavery" construct is also one I've hated for as long as I can remember because, in the first place, why would the legacy of slavery be more meaningful than the legacy of sharecropping and Jim Crow and the legacy of the Great Migration? Or even the New Deal and the CIO? But what's ideologically useful about the legacy of the slavery trope is that it can mean two seemingly quite different things. One is that it can be invoked as proof that blacks are inferior, because slavery has forged an indelible mark. Or it can be invoked as a cultural pathology argument. But it's a misunderstanding to assume that there's a sharp contrast between cultural arguments about inequality and biological arguments. They're basically the same.

If you go back to the highwater mark of race theory at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, you don't need to have a theory of biological heredity to make a deterministic claim. You can shed the need for complex biological argument and just say that the cultures are different, and the culture decrees these kinds of inadequacies.

Q. I have not tried to search out a historical linkage to this before, but it seems to me that going all the way back to the antebellum it has been the Democratic Party that has done the heavy lifting in promoting racial identity. Of course, there's a division of labor with the Republicans since the late 1960s and Nixon's so-called "southern strategy." Not so long ago, people referred to Republican politicians using "dog whistles" for racism. With Trump it's become a bullhorn. But the *Times'* 1619 Project reflects the agenda of the Democratic Party today. They're trying to cobble together an electoral coalition based on identities.

A. Absolutely. It's fascinating to watch Hillary Clinton in 2016 because I remember very well 1992, when the cutting edge of Clintonism was showing there was a new Democratic Party that was going to make Wall Street grateful. It wasn't a party that was going to coddle black and poor people. And Bill Clinton was very clear about that. That's what the Crime Bill and Welfare Reform were all about. To see the Clintons presenting themselves as the avatars of racial justice against Bernie Sanders in 2016

was really extraordinary.

Q. Thank you for speaking with us. Before we conclude, let me ask you what you are working on now.

A. Well I've started doing a column every month in the *New Republic*, but I'm trying to finish a book that actually started at the beginning of the Obama era. I was approached by Verso to do a book on Obama and I said no, but I would consider doing a book on Obama-mania, by which I mean the phenomenon that people who should have known better got so excited about him.

Q. You had a really prescient essay on Obama way back in 1996, when he was in Illinois state senator. You referred to him as "a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable do-good credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neoliberal politics," and predicted he was the wave of the future.

A. Yes, that essay was just an example of right place at the right time and just keeping your eyes open. I was living right there in that district. I've kind of joked that I was in the birthing room at the outset of his political career. But to really answer the Obama question requires something better and more elaborate. So, the book I'm working on is an account of the decline and transformation on the left in the US since World War II, and I've just started work on the last chapter.

Q. I look forward to reading it.

Footnotes

[1] Merlin Chowkwanyun is an Assistant Professor of Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia University

[2] Walter Benn Michaels is a Professor of English at the University of Illinois Chicago and author of *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*

[3] Cedric Johnson is an Associate Professor of African American Studies and Political Science at the University of Illinois Chicago

[4] James Henry Hammond was a Democratic Party Senator from South Carolina (1857-1860) and leading proponent of slavery in the lead-up to the Civil War



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