

Book Review

Adolph Reed, Jr.'s *The South: Jim Crow and its Afterlives*

Helen Halyard
21 December 2023

We publish here Helen Halyard's final article for the World Socialist Web Site. Helen, who died suddenly on November 28, 2023, at the age of 73, had been at work on a review of Adolph Reed Jr.'s *The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives*. The subject held both political and personal significance for Helen. Politically, because over the course of her long career as a Trotskyist, Helen intransigently opposed all efforts to divide the working class by race, the essence of Jim Crow segregation as well as black nationalism and present-day identity politics. Personally, because Helen, raised in New York City, was the daughter of black migrants who frequently visited family in South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama in the last years of Jim Crow.

***The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives*, by Adolph Reed, Jr. Verso, 2022**

Adolph Reed, Jr.'s book, *The South: Jim Crow and its Afterlives*, paints a picture of what life was like in the southern states of America under Jim Crow segregation, described by the author as "the regime of codified, rigorously, and unambiguously enforced racism and white supremacy."

Under Jim Crow, everything was done to humiliate and degrade the African American population. If blacks looked at whites in a certain way, it could mean death. Interracial marriage was illegal until such laws were ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). Even casual interactions between whites and blacks were not allowed. Beginning in the 1890s, a raft of laws stripped the right to vote from the majority of blacks, and all public space was segregated by law or custom—schools and colleges; buses, trains, streetcars; water fountains and bathrooms; diners and movie theaters.

It was these conditions, along with the growth of industry, that generated the massive movement of the black population from the South to the North beginning in the 1920s and lasting through the 1960s. By 1960, only 15 percent of blacks remained on farms, while most had moved to the major urban centers taking jobs as wage laborers, creating the conditions for the destruction of Jim Crow.

The South presents this story in part from the standpoint of Reed's own personal recollections. Reed was born in the Bronx in 1947 and lived for a time in Brooklyn but grew up in Arkansas and Louisiana. His parents, who were educators, would lecture him before a trip to the South on the "protocols" of Jim Crow that were second nature to those living there. Violating these protocols could mean a death sentence, as it did for 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955. In the memoir *Death of Innocence*, Emmett's mother Mamie Till explains her hesitation in allowing Emmett to visit Mississippi for a summer after spending his childhood growing up in Illinois.

Commenting on the murder of Till, Reed states, "Black people were always expected to know the local rules and etiquette; mistakes, including those made in complete ignorance, could be deadly and age was no

excuse."

Reed spent time with his mother's family, who lived in a section of New Orleans, a port city located on the Mississippi River with a very large and diverse working class population that has long faced terrible poverty and discrimination. Conditions in the city for many white workers were no better than for blacks. In the 1830s, close to 10,000 Irish workers died from malaria as they were building the New Basin Canal, their lives viewed to be more expendable than those of Louisiana's slaves. The Jewish and Italian populations were also discriminated against. In 1891, for example, 11 Sicilians were lynched by racist mobs for allegedly killing a policeman.

Such observations, made in Reed's short memoir, point to the complex nature of Jim Crow, which cannot be understood merely through the prism of black-white relations.

Many of the stories regarding his family, who were part of an educated layer, are quite humorous and give a sense of how black families sought to cope and not become dominated by the Jim Crow laws. While riding the Algiers ferry with his grandmother across the river, Reed noticed that chicken wire separated white and black passengers and asked why that was the case. Whispering in a very low voice, his grandmother remarked that "a lot of crazy people ride this ferry, and they have to sit on the other side."

Reed recounts another incident in which white store owners caught him shoplifting and, instead of informing the police in accord with Jim Crow laws, they gave him a lecture explaining that he wouldn't be so lucky if caught stealing again. Reed, meanwhile, trembled with fear at the prospect of possibly being sent to Angola State Penitentiary, a former slave plantation and the largest state prison in the US.

Yet the book is more than a personal recounting of an individual upbringing. Reed's *The South* is unique among memoirs of the Jim Crow era in that it is intertwined with historical and social analysis.

Reed departs from his autobiography frequently, as for example when he stops to explain what differentiated the period of slavery—abolished at the end of the Civil War in 1865, followed by the 14th Amendment granting citizenship rights (1868) and the 15th Amendment granting African American men the right to vote (1869)—and that of the Jim Crow era. This period lasted for three quarters of a century after being legally legitimized in the 1896 US Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which declared the constitutionality of "separate but equal" racial segregation.

In the book's introduction, Reed explains that behind the implementation of the rigid system of Jim Crow laws during the 1890s and early 1900s stood economic, social and class interests. He points to the work of legal historian Charles A. Lofgren, who wrote in *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation*, "Jim Crow was the reassertion of

planter and merchant class power following the defeat of reconstruction and the populist movement which brought black and white workers together in a struggle after the civil war.” Thus, the policy of legally institutionalized racism, imposed by the Democratic Party, was a conscious response by the ruling class, which was frightened by the revolutionary potential of a unified movement of the oppressed masses—sharecroppers and workers, white and black.

Though Reed does not deal with this element of the history, Jim Crow was also bound up with the emergence of imperialism at the end of the 19th century as explained in C. Vann Woodward’s *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. “At the very time that imperialism was sweeping the country, the doctrine of racism reached a crest of acceptability and popularity among respectable scholarly and intellectual circles,” Woodward writes. “At home and abroad biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, as well as journalists and novelists, gave support to the doctrine that races were discrete entities, and that ‘Anglo-Saxon’ or ‘Caucasian’ was the superior of them all.”

When Jim Crow was challenged by the growth of the mass civil rights movement beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the Democratic Party in the South employed state violence, and utilized the Ku Klux Klan to carry out intimidation and murder against the black population.

In 1964, three civil rights activists, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered in Mississippi for trying to register black voters. In 1965, Viola Liuzzo was murdered following the 1965 Selma march. These were among hundreds of martyrs who were murdered by Klansmen, often with the collaboration of FBI informants and in collusion with the state as a last desperate attempt to maintain the old order.

Reed describes his fear traveling in the South in 1965 following these events and after the passage of the Civil Rights Act banning racial segregation in public facilities. Even though the signs designating “colored” and “white” had been removed at airports, he waited outside in the cold for a connecting flight rather than take a gamble going through the wrong door.

It is important to note that the legal dismantling of Jim Crow segregation was a victory for the whole American working class. While the last chapter of Reed’s book points to many of the objective conditions that led to the system being undermined, particularly the great migration and emergence of the mass industrial unions, absent from the analysis is one of the most important historical developments in the 20th century: the victory the Russian Revolution in 1917, and its impact in the United States and globally.

As pointed out in the article “Martin Luther King and the fight for social equality” by Tom Mackaman and Niles Niemuth, the Russian Revolution revealed the power of the working class to change society and eliminate all forms of discrimination and oppression. One of the most prominent of these figures, Claude McKay, stated, “For American Negroes the indisputable and outstanding fact of the Russian Revolution is that a mere handful of Jews, much less in ratio to the number of Negroes in the American population, have attained, through the Revolution, all the political and social rights denied them under the regime of the Czar.”

It was the Communist Party—in the early 1920s under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky—that championed the struggle against racism and Jim Crow. The CP’s degeneration under Stalinism sowed confusion, but the attraction among black workers to the Russian Revolution remained. For example, the mobilization of the working class to defend the Scottsboro Boys, falsely accused of raping white girls in Alabama in 1931, helped lay the groundwork for the broader civil rights movement, in spite of the growing disorientation promoted from Moscow.

Reed’s observations in the final chapter of this work, “Echoes, Scar Tissue and Historicity,” following the legal dismantling of Jim Crow, lay

bare the essential class issues that formed the basis of legal apartheid in the South, as well as what has and has not changed following its demise. Traveling back to New Orleans in 1993, Reed observed that while many African Americans held elected offices, more notable was the large number still stuck in conditions of grinding poverty. Jim Crow was defeated, but, as he notes, “that victory left the undergirding class system untouched and in practical terms affirmed it.”

Reed has sharply criticized the work of Ibram X. Kendi, author of *Stamped from the Beginning*, which sees society in purely racial terms. Instead, Reed views Jim Crow and the developments that took place following the Civil War and Reconstruction as a specific historical stage of American capitalism that can only be understood by examining the nature of class society and how this expresses itself in decisions made by the ruling class. Yet in *The South* the industrial working class as the central actor in the fight to end Jim Crow remains very much in the background, and international considerations—the Russian Revolution, the Cold War, decolonization, etc., are barely considered.

Within his framework Reed is able to make important points, as, for example, when he reviews the controversy over the removal of Confederate statues in New Orleans proposed by Democratic Mayor Mitch Landrieu shortly after the 2015 shooting massacre at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, by white supremacist Dylann Roof. Landrieu’s decision to remove the statues was not driven by a concern for democratic issues but was a tactical maneuver carried out as an attempt to refurbish the image of the Democratic Party.

Speaking on the significance of this development, Reed explains that the deeper historical meaning of the monuments is not that they celebrate the Confederacy but that they were erected between 1884 and 1915, and that this timing coincided with the construction and propagation of the Lost Cause ideology following the defeat of Reconstruction and the Populist movement. The Lost Cause theory presented the American Civil War from the perspective of the former slave owners and romanticized the “Old South,” claiming that the Confederacy waged a just war against the Union army to defend these traditions.

Behind the drive to separate blacks and whites in the South was the need to cover up class divisions and suppress living standards for both black and white workers. In 1892, the same year Homer A. Plessy challenged the state’s new Separate Car Act, black and white workers in New Orleans conducted a largely successful general strike in the face of the opposition’s attempt to incite racial division among the strikers.

Reed also points out that while Democratic Mayor Landrieu and the New Orleans City Council rid the city of Confederate monuments, his administration continued to carry out social policies that have contributed to the city being one of the most economically polarized in the United States. The devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was used by successive multi-racial city administrations to privatize the public education system, gentrify the city, and carry out a wholesale assault on major social programs. As conditions for black and white workers have worsened, a tiny and more privileged layer of African Americans has used racial and identity politics to increase their own personal wealth at the expense of the working class.

Reed, professor emeritus of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, is the author of numerous books and articles dealing with race and class in American society and has a decades-long history in critiquing racial identity politics from a left-wing perspective. As a critic of the race reductionism expressed in the *New York Times’ 1619 Project* Reed emphasizes the salience of class and economic relations as the basis and promotion of racism, something that he spoke to the WSWS about in an interview in 2019.

At the same time, Reed remains in the orbit of the Democratic Socialists of America and the trade union bureaucracy. He was a founding member of the Labor Party initiative headed by union leader Tony Mazzocchi, and

he supported Bernie Sanders for president in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

The criticism made by Reed of the Democratic Party establishment in New Orleans and the emphasis placed on the primacy of class is correct, but this remains circumscribed by his own politics. Reed looks to what are supposedly more “progressive” sections of this same Democratic Party and the trade unions to build a broad-based movement that he claims will defend democratic rights and oppose war.

Reed’s political positions emerged clearly on the eve of the 2020 presidential elections in a debate with David North, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, appropriately titled “What is left of American Democracy?” In the discussion, Reed called on workers to hold their nose and vote for a Biden-Harris ticket as the way to defeat Trump and the threat of dictatorship in the US. This stands in sharp opposition to a program calling on workers to break decisively with bourgeois politics and organize independently of the Democratic Party, the party of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus.

Yet, in spite of these limitations to his outlook, Reed’s central aim in *The South* is laudatory: to bring to younger audiences an understanding of what Jim Crow was, at a time in which the viewpoint is “expressed more and more commonly as the era recedes [that] the civil rights movement’s victories were trivial.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact