

“Economics vs Ideology”
a review by Dick Burkhardt of
Toward Freedom:
The Case Against Race Reductionism
By Toure´ Reed (2020)



Toure´ Reed is the son of the well-known black Marxist scholar Adolph Reed and has inherited his father’s clear-minded focus on the economic underpinnings of racial injustice. His “realpolitik” message is that lasting racial justice will come from black and white acting together, not ideologies like Critical Race Theory which attempt to reduce all injustice to blaming whites, or “race reductionism”.

Now Marxism is all about class reductionism (the working class vs the bourgeoisie). Except, in this book, Reed does not talk openly about either Critical Race Theory or Marxism, trying not to reignite the controversy over Adolph Reed’s cancelled talk before the Democratic Socialists of America in 2020.

Instead, Reed advocates for a version of “black and white together” that he calls a “public-good-oriented” politics, citing Bernie Sanders’ updated version of FDR’s New Deal. He prefers this description to “democratic socialism” in the current US context. Much of the book delves deeply into the history of racial politics in 20th century America to demonstrate that success for blacks came when the black and white working classes found common ground, facts that have been obscured by today’s race reductionist historians.

Reed cites “a deeply rooted reactionary tendency in contemporary liberal discourse related to race and inequality. Democrats and many self-identified progressives not only dismissed the utility of Sanders’ platform for African Americans...but they coalesced around putatively left identitarian formulations to attack his program from the right” (p 7).

His point is that “a living wage would do much more to both reduce black poverty rates and enhance African Americans’ ability to accumulate wealth than interracial friendships every could” (p 169). And, as to Ta-Nahisi Coates, the black champion of reparations and race reductionism, Reed concludes that Coates’ writing “is a call for continuing along the same path that has failed most black Americans since the Johnson administration.” “While it is unlikely that Coates set out to be neoliberalism’s most visible black emissary of the post-racial era, his insistence that we must treat race that is a force that exists independently of capitalism has, ironically, earned this accolade” (p 158).

Reed has a whole chapter on “when black progressives didn’t separate race from class” – from the 30s through the 60s. Even at the end of that era, its veterans, A Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, proposed a “domestic Marshall Plan” or “Freedom Budget for All” (p 67) that would have lifted the working class as a whole through universal programs. Instead the Johnson era means-testing ended up eroding the racial solidarity that had been developed by many unions. He quotes Rustin that “Irish, Italian, and Jewish Americans gained political and economic power through multi-ethnic, class-based political alliances and trade union membership” (p 73), so he knew that something similar was possible for African Americans.

I learned a lot of interesting history from this book – history that has been suppressed in recent years by the new orthodoxy of race reductionism. But the lesson is simple – economics has always been the underlying driver, with racial antagonisms being exploited by the elites, as feasible, to make the “rich, richer, and the poor, poorer”. The same is happening today, as both the far Left and the far Right fuel the cultural wars, which drive the political polarization and gridlock. Universal programs like Social Security will survive even the most reactionary and racist regimes, so both Obama and Biden are really coming up short, racially speaking, by failing to aim for Medicare for All and a universal basic income.