



Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene

Adolph L. Reed Jr.

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Hailed by *Publishers Weekly* for its “forceful” and “bracing opinions on race and politics,” *Class Notes* is critic Adolph Reed Jr.’s latest blast of clear thinking on matters of race, class, and other American dilemmas. The book begins with a consideration of the theoretical and practical strategies of the U.S. left over the last three decades: Reed argues against the solipsistic approaches of cultural or identity politics, and in favor of class-based political interpretation and action.

Class Notes moves on to tackle race relations, ethnic studies, family values, welfare reform, the so-called underclass, and black public intellectuals in essays called “head-spinning” and “brilliantly executed” by David Levering Lewis.

Adolph Reed Jr. has earned a national reputation for his controversial evaluations of American politics. These essays illustrate why people like Katha Pollitt consider Reed “the smartest person of any race, class, or gender writing on race, class, and gender.”

Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene Details

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Will says

Reed is the sharpest writer around on issues of race, class, and the language we use to discuss them, and this book collects some of his best work. Tokens of the White Left is one of the best essays on race I've ever read. It's worth picking up for that alone.

Reginald Simms says

Very well written and fluid. The short essays are poignant, radical, and nuanced.

Pascal says

Once again Adolph Reed, Jr. outdoes himself with salient commentary on the contemporary political ineffectualness that plagues the left. His commentary on Public Intellectuals and the rise of Barack Obama were prescient. Reed shows once again why he is one of the few serious intellectuals we have on the left.

Derek says

I first read this book several years ago and have been coming back to it ever since, along with everything else Reed has ever written. He has probably been the most influential thinker/writer for me in the past 3-4 years. He really offered a way of thinking about class, race, American politics and left strategy that I was hungering for. He is really one of the shrewdest political thinkers alive. As for being a "black public intellectual"... he's got more honest substance in one essay than all the blathering Cornell Wests and Michael Eric Dysons have in their entire oeuvre combined. Anyways, this book is a great and very readable intro to Reed's thought.

And he's actually an ACTIVIST too! Especially with the Labor Party. I almost wish he wasn't as active as he is so that he would write more.

Chris says

Adolph Reed, where have you been all my life? Class Notes is a collection of essays on black politics, the labor movement, left strategy, the "underclass" debate, the suckiness of liberals, and a range of other issues, all addressed with Reed's ascerbic wit and razor sharp political analysis. His introductory analysis of the retreat of the left into the academy and postmodern identity politics since the 1960s should be required reading for all leftists. His essay "What Do the Drums Say, Booker" should be put in the same category, as it definitively debunks the claims of the last wave of "black public intellectuals" to "Voice of the Black Community" status and manages to be completely hilarious at the same time. What's best about Reed's

perspective is that it allows him to walk and chew gum at the same time; while recognizing the need for historically oppressed identity groups to organize around their specific grievances, he argues persuasively that these oppressions are ultimately experienced through political economy and that class organization in the interest of all working people needs to remain the foundation of a real progressive political movement. This seems so painfully obvious to me, but unfortunately, many of us on the left have lost sight of this reality. How I wish Reed was an Honorary Co-Chair of my own organization (Democratic Socialists of America) rather than Cornel West. I think we'd be much better off.

ralowe says

adolph reed has a boundless distrust for conventional politics but that analysis stops with the mainstream labor movement. he has something to say about nearly every other figure in black politics. the labor movement is probably the political configuration i trust the least. take in-home careworkers. the seiu represents their interests allegedly, they do insanely backbreaking work that is largely taken-for-granted housework, and they receive virtually no compensation, face arcane bureaucracy, enjoy no social validation etc. for the hours they put in. mostly the seiu cut deals and bargains with larger institutional interests that don't benefit the working class, nor whatever classification of feminized labor we would call what in-home careworkers do, and it doesn't seem to really matter. i mean, it should matter most. the reality of this profound ideological compromise is lost here even though reed is uncommonly responsive to gender dynamics. maybe i need to check for reed's writing directly on these specific issues. the little bit of labor organizing i've been exposed to is the iww, what he'd probably consider the extreme left-wing; one small example of the iww's ideology is that they are open to admitting the unemployed as rank and file. plus i like lucy parsons. i kind of feel like that is the bar that a mass labor movement must rise to meet, and it's kind of common knowledge that the prime mission of a lot of unions are compromises often in favor of whoever's or whatever's in power. but reed's writing is fantastic, he's incredibly read-y. began reading this in a reading group, then read a totally different book by reed published around the same time as this, and i feel the other book is a more significant specimen of his thought.

Andrew Fairweather says

This stellar collection of essays (most of which were first printed in issues of the Village Voice) was released in 2000—yet, the issues discussed here have only become amplified through their aggregation via social media platforms. The essays are grouped into three categories which (1) combat the “personal is political” modes of “resistance” as it particularly relates to black political involvement, (2) combat strange technical notions of equality and their bizarre manifestations in American political life, and (3) offers practical ways forward to move beyond the essentialist deadlock which the self-proclaimed “left” finds itself in.

A running thread in this collection is Reed's aversion to the use of words such as “community” and “grassroots” to refer to a mystical-like black voting bloc who all thinks and does alike. The presumption here is that the black “community” does not suffer from the same contradictions as other groups (i.e. whites) stemming from class and status. Thus, the question of proper treatment of issues in relation to blacks in America takes a tone of the paranoiac, “what must They think of us? (whites)” This racial-cultural essentialization of the “community” results in a deadlock where blacks are never addressed fully as equal citizens called upon to participate in a political decision-making process...

“But who exactly is the “community”? How can we assess the claims of those who purport to represent it? These questions are seldom raised, much less answered. A strain of Jeffersonian romanticism obscures them among the left, for whom community implies an organic entity animated by a collective mind and will. From that perspective we don’t need to ask how the community makes its decisions, how it forms its will, because it reflects and almost mystical identity of interest and common feeling.

[...]

Because whites by and large don’t see black Americans as a complex population of differentiated individuals, the organic community imagery seems reasonable and natural to them.”

Instead, whites look for black spokespeople to speak on “the community’s” behalf. It goes without saying that this is particularly the case when this spokesperson does not effectively challenge the way in which political power is actually distributed and maintained, which would, of course, need to take on the difficult task of historical materialist analysis which went beyond charges of the perils of “whiteness” or the “authenticity” of cultural “blackness.” This theme of the pitfalls of the “leadership” impulse reaches a fever pitch in the essay, ‘What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?’, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the need for whites to have access to their black-whisperer in the form of the black-public-intellectual. Instead, Reed argues that:

“What the current environment demands from black intellectuals who would comment on public affairs is not more whining about disparagement of the “black body” in Western culture (as if that were news) or examination of representations of representations or noodling about how, if we apply the right spin, everything black people do is resistance or oppression. And most of all, there is no need for interpretations that presume an uncomplicated, conveniently mute black reality; there’s already a surfeit of analysis propelled by the collective black subject—“black people want, feel, etc.” As is true on the left generally, what is desperately called for is stimulation of informed discussion among black Americans, and between blacks and others, that presumes proprietorship of the institutions of governance and policy processes on an identical basis with other citizens and aims at crafting agendas that define and realize black interests accordingly.”

The other main strand I found was Reed’s excellent citation of the morality play of the “responsibility” ethos as it began to spring up on both the so-called left and the right after Reagan and the failure of McGovern (which still haunts us to this day, I’m afraid...). Though cloaked in a cloth most Americans do not find fault with, this ethos is used to justify some of the most horrific theories normalized in public discourse—that there is a sector of the population (usually with darker skin... fancy that!) who essentially belongs to a different species of person. This characterization is ever-more dangerous when you throw into the mix the rigid biological claims such as those found in ‘Bell Curve.’ If some of us are hard-wired criminals and derelicts, why, what’s the point of fighting for reform and access to resources? Such a figuration of the problem lets the government off the hook as a body which ought to be responsible to the people... and breeds the atomized cynicism I’m sure we’ve all cozied up to at some point in our lives.

It is refreshing to hear all of this. Reed is a statist, and I respect that. I think many who consider themselves to be in the left find it fashionable to proclaim their orientation against “The State” and simply leave it at that. It’s what fosters this docile “everyday resistance” politics which does not beg of us to actually engage with power and assume responsibility for its equitable, proper distribution. Call yourself whatever you will,

but an engagement with power is absolutely necessary if you wish to change the game. No, the aim is not to help people make choices and exercise a flimsy democratic right—surely, the goal is to enable people to determine their own choices. This can only result from being unafraid of engaging with power in a real way. So yes, your revolutionary ideas do need to, eventually, become principles of governance. That probably sounds boring, but this is something we need to think about. Reed knows this. Hell, as an organizer, he **does** this. Reed's analysis of the left's slow decline into lukewarm parables which used to be the handmaid of the right, particularly as it relates to black public life, is second to none.

Emma says

i really want to talk about this book with someone. reed's essays explore, in original and thought-provoking ways, the relationship between movement-building, the academy and identity politics. there were definitely some facets of his essays that i disagreed with, but overall i felt that this book deepened my own understanding of movement-building.

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Came back to this book in May 2015. Such smart, helpful, and forceful writing. Highly recommended!

Pascal says

I like the highly informed and critical look on race and politics on the American scene... very worthy read.

Micah says

Not every single essay in this book is earth-shatteringly good. And Reed is sometimes overly dismissive of what I consider to be developments on the Left that aren't particularly harmful or insignificant. But reading this book made me feel like a serious weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. It gave me permission to admit to myself that developments or ideas within the Left that I've long had internal personal doubts about but have never wanted to admit out loud or even to myself, may, in fact, be right—or, if not right, at least worth voicing and debating.

The Left, as anyone who's been around it in the past few decades already knows, is in really rough shape. And when you're in such rough shape, you're desperate for anything that you can claim as a victory, or even just a positive development. When victories around major society-wide issues that require real mass movement building and thus are really difficult to win—issues like ending racial segregation in housing, universal health care, affordable housing, workers' rights, etc.—are in short supply, it can be really depressing and debilitating. So it makes sense that many of us would choose to set the bar a bit lower for ourselves, to battles that we are more capable of winning (many of which, of course, as Reed notes several times in the book, are also extremely important to fight over and win).

But Reed's basic case here is about not indulging in that temptation. He's arguing here that we need to keep our eyes on the prize; that we can't give up on those bigger-picture goals, and that there's no substitute for a mass movement required to win them—no shortcuts to achieving mass social change. And the sooner we can admit that to ourselves, the sooner we can get to the business of actually creating that kind of movement and

winning those victories.

It's a message that's a bit depressing in its sobriety. But if we're going to ever win victories around those issues, we don't really have another choice.

Also, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that Reed has some of the most scorching prose I've ever read from an academic. Seriously. It's so white-hot and so brutal that I'm afraid to have the man read anything I've ever written, lest he take issue with any piece of it and write such a blistering, merciless takedown that I'll be paralyzed from ever writing anything again.

Eric says

Adolph Reed is the most brilliant scholar on issues of race, politics, and activism in the country.

He's also the best professor I have ever had.

Gladys Tiffany says

I'm doing a lot of pondering of racism and classism. Also learning about successful social change movements by boning up on the civil rights movement.

This book is challenging because Reed tries not to simplify the complexities of a topic that no one wants to acknowledge. And it is complex. Invisible assumptions on all sides that it would be more politic to have laid away already. And as long as nobody of color, language or culture difference appears to challenge the assumptions, it's pleasant to believe we have laid them aside.

But the people of color, language and different cultures are our neighbors. Pretending they're not really here gets harder all the time. Doing the prickly work of learning to relate respectfully to each other is a skill we gotta learn if plan to survive. The difficult issues presented in this book don't shy away from that.
