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## Class Reductionism and Environmental Racism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, the N.Y. Times reported on the clash between Adolph Reed Jr. and the Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus in DSA. The caucus advocates stepped up support for BLM protests while Reed views them as tools of corporate America. Naturally, when the event organizers scheduled a Zoom lecture for Reed, the caucus

demanded a debate, surely expecting to be ignored. When Reed grew wary over the possibility that the upstarts might crash his talk, he canceled himself.

The Times article summarized the Reed position as shared by a class of historians, political scientists and intellectuals who argue against overstating race as a construct. Even if they accept the existence of racism in the U.S., they reject the need for an anti-racist movement. Instead, the goal is to create class unity around programs like Medicare for All since poor whites would benefit as well. When you “fixate” on race, you risk dividing a potentially powerful coalition and play into conservatives’ hands.

Of course, this vulgar Marxism seems even more outlandish than ever in the face of the massive resistance to the status quo now underway. After the George Floyd murder, anti-racist protests became the largest in American history. Without skipping a beat, the NBA has gone on strike to protest the cops who left Jacob Blake permanently paralyzed. To counterpose Medicare for All to these struggles is foolish, if not outright reactionary.

While it is true that poor whites have much in common with poor Blacks economically, racial oppression afflicts Blacks no matter the income. That’s the lesson to be drawn from an August 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday N.Y. Times Magazine article titled “The Refinery Next Door” that chronicles the deadly impact of pollution on the Black community, even when it is middle-income. When I read the article, a paragraph struck me as dealing a decisive blow against the economic determinism of Adolph Reed Jr. and his co-thinkers:

In 2007, the United Church of Christ updated its research, this time with Bullard as a principal author, in “Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007,” finding that racial disparities in the location of toxic-waste facilities were “greater than previously reported.” People of color made up a majority of the population in communities within 1.8 miles of a polluting facility, and race — not income or property values — was the most significant predictor. The following year, a study by two University of Colorado social scientists published in the journal *Sociological Perspectives* found that African-American families with incomes of \$50,000 to \$60,000 were more likely to live in environmentally polluted neighborhoods than white households with incomes below \$10,000.

The Bullard mentioned in the article is Robert Bullard, the father of the Environmental Justice Movement. Bullard, an African-American born in 1946, is currently a Distinguished Professor at Texas Southern University in Houston, a public historically Black college. In 1979 his wife, attorney Linda McKeever Bullard, represented

Northwood Manor neighborhood residents in their fight against their middle-class, suburban neighborhood housing a landfill. The lawsuit was the first ever that charged environmental discrimination in waste facility siting under civil rights legislation. The upscale Northwood Manor neighborhood was an unlikely location for a garbage dump, except being over 82 percent black.

Author of 26 books and many articles, Bullard clearly understands the combined character of class and race in poor Black neighborhoods that suffer from environmental racism. However, he also understands that Black people are often the victims, no matter their income. In an article for the Autumn/Winter, 2001 edition of *Phylon* titled “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters,” Bullard refers to “racial apartheid” as responsible for corporate polluters preying on Black neighborhoods. Since it is far more difficult for Blacks to become homeowners, they are in no position to call for NIMBY (not in my backyard). When you are a renter, it is up to the landlord to resist a landfill or an oil refinery in a Black neighborhood. White landlords are not famous for standing up for the rights of Black tenants.

Blacks not only have to put up with racist landlords and banks. Municipal governments, particularly in the south, impose zoning laws that turn white neighborhoods into racial enclaves. Even when zoning laws do not exist, there are other ways to make Black neighborhoods dumping grounds. Bullard points out that in Houston, the local government replaced NIMBY with PIBBY (place in black’s back yard.)

These practices lowered residents’ property values, accelerated physical deterioration, and increased disinvestment in the communities. Moreover, the discriminatory siting of landfills and incinerators stigmatized the neighborhoods as “dumping grounds” for a host of other unwanted facilities, including salvage yards, recycling operations, and automobile “chop shops.”

It is little wonder that when a neighborhood suffers pollution, its residents’ health suffers. Poor Black communities have suffered disproportionately from the pandemic just as they have from cancer and pulmonary ailments.

On August 8<sup>th</sup>, the Intercept published an article titled “What Racism Smells Like” that connected the dots between racism, pollution and the pandemic. It profiles Kim Gaddy, who works as an environmental justice organizer for Clean Water Action of New Jersey. Gaddy describes Newark, her home-town, as having 930 facilities permitted to release

pollution, 87 of which have current violations. Environmental racism has affected her personally. Born and raised in the South Ward, she suffered from asthma. During an attack, she would wind up in the local emergency room. All of her children — now 31, 20, and 16 — also have asthma, as do her parents, two of her brothers, and her first cousin. Newark's death rate from Covid-19 is 223 per 100,000 people, compared to 177 statewide and just under 44 in the U.S. as a whole. The connection between environmental racism and the fatality rate in Newark could not be more obvious.

Wouldn't it benefit Black people to move away from the polluters to a pleasant neighborhood far from Newark? Even if they couldn't afford to own a home, they might rent an apartment in a comfortable, well-maintained multiple dwelling. That's the last thing Trump would permit, even using this possibility as a racist calling card in his reelection bid. In a virtual rally, he said, "People have gone to the suburbs. They want the beautiful homes. They don't have to have a low-income housing development built in their community...which has reduced the prices of their homes and also increased crime substantially." In essence, he wants to build a "beautiful new wall" between Newark's Blacks and white towns in New Jersey.

It would be a mistake to think that white liberals are any more open to such housing. In a Nation Magazine article titled "Trump Supports Housing Segregation—and So Do a Lot of White Liberals", Kali Holloway pointed out that in Maplewood, N.J., where BLM signs are ubiquitous, a group of Black parents had to file a lawsuit in 2018 to force the desegregation of district public schools.

As for BLM, one might hope that it will begin to challenge racist housing practices in combination with police brutality protests. Richard Rothstein made a good case for that type of activism in a N.Y. Times op-ed titled "The Black Lives Next Door". He focuses on San Mateo, California, where young white BLM activist Sophia Heath and fellow activists were trying to figure out their next steps after the George Floyd protests had subsided.

Rothstein describes San Mateo as a segregated Silicon Valley city. Sophia Heath wondered why there are no Black families in her Hillsdale neighborhood. San Mateo's few remaining African-Americans mostly live in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Also, only one percent of Hillsdale High School students are Black. Heath would like to see a more diverse city but is not sure where to start. A housing development for lower-income Blacks might help, but most Black families in the vicinity have incomes too high

to qualify. Others are not rich enough to buy the typical Silicon Valley house. It would help if she understood how her neighborhood became so lily-white. Rothstein provides some background:

In San Mateo, they would learn that builders constructed the residential Hillsdale neighborhood for whites only in the mid-20th century. Public records reveal that the 1941 deed to Sophia Heath's family home says, "No persons other than members of the Caucasian or White race shall be permitted to occupy any portion of said property, other than as domestics in the employ of the occupants of the premises."

This racist exclusion was part of a pattern in which a cabal of real estate developers and banks openly worked to keep Blacks out of desirable neighborhoods. Rothstein is the author of a book titled "The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America" that makes the case that even Democratic Party politicians worked hand in glove with the real estate and banking industries to enforce segregated housing. If the idea of racial segregation in the north summons up images of Fred Trump at a KKK rally, keep in mind that the New Deal was in cahoots with racists in both the north and the south. Despite Bernie Sanders describing Joe Biden as possibly the most progressive president since FDR, FDR was anything but when it came to housing. As for Biden, he is on record as stating in 1977 that certain desegregation policies would cause his children to grow up "in a racial jungle." Now, he sings a different tune. He calls for desegregating suburban housing. Is that just something he is saying to win votes from Black people? I'll leave that for you to decide.

Given Jacobin's hero worship of Bernie Sanders, whose idea of socialism is identical to the New Deal, it is not surprising that it published a hostile review of Rothstein's book. Critic Richard Walker, a professor emeritus of Geography at the University of California–Berkeley and director of the Living New Deal, felt the need to whitewash the New Deal.

Titled "The New Deal Didn't Create Segregation", the article tries to excuse FDR because segregation "something [is] embedded in American social structures since before the founding." That might be true, but the New Deal didn't challenge racism, as Rothstein points out in his reply. Rothstein writes:

Walker is troubled by what he terms my "attack on public housing." I make no such attack but provide a dispassionate account of its racial history. The book's frontispiece, as



Walker notes, is a photo of FDR giving keys to the one hundred thousandth family to get New Deal public housing. The family and surrounding crowd of Pittsburgh project residents are white and apparently middle class. The Public Works Administration, the first New Deal agency to construct public housing, listed each project's racial designation. The all-white projects outnumbered the all-black ones. A very few were "both," but the PWA segregated those by building.

The great African American writer Langston Hughes's autobiography recounts his adolescence in integrated Central Cleveland, where he dated a Jewish girl and his best friend was Polish. Such early-twentieth-century neighborhoods were not as rare as they later became. Before highways, factories needed access to ports or railroad terminals to receive parts and ship products; workers of both races and varied ethnicities lived nearby and walked to work. The New Deal created segregation in Cleveland's Central neighborhood by building one project for whites and a separate one for blacks.

It seems that Richard Walker wasn't the only professor trying to absolve FDR of racism. In November, 2019, Adolph Reed Jr. wrote an article in *The New Republic* titled "The New Deal Wasn't Intrinsically Racist" that managed to say not a single word about FDR's promotion of segregated housing. Fancy that.

In addition to opposing BLM, Reed is also a long-standing critic of reparations. In 2007, Jonathan Kaplan and Andrew Valls made the case in *Public Affairs Quarterly* for reparations being justified by housing discrimination rather than slavery, which has generally been the basis for prior claims. When Blacks were excluded from home ownership due to redlining, they could not build wealth based on home equity. To buy a house, you need to get a mortgage. When Blacks went to the same banks as whites, they got shafted just as Richard Rothstein noted in his op-ed piece on San Mateo.

The FHA, a New Deal program, also made sure to provide loan insurance mostly to whites. Also, the GI Bill had the same racist dynamic:

The GI Bill, passed in the waning days of World War II, only served to reinforce the discriminatory tendencies of other policies. As Ira Katznelson has recently documented, though the GI Bill made no reference to race or racial categories, and was officially available to all returning veterans (many of whom were black), the bill was written with the intention of limiting the benefits that blacks could receive – and it was largely successful in this regard. The key provision that allowed for this was the one that required

that the bill, though federally funded, to be implemented by states and localities. Hence African Americans had to approach white-controlled local boards to access benefits to which they were entitled under the act. This greatly discouraged blacks from applying, and those who did often faced discrimination.

Even after Congress passed the Fair Housing Amendment Act in 1988, nothing could reverse the damage of the past hundred years. Redlining had condemned Black people to live in run-down neighborhoods close to landfills, garbage dumps and oil refineries. Segregated housing combined with underfunded schools and Blacks blocked from better factory jobs resulted in a permanent quasi-apartheid status that defies all attempts to remediate. When Martin Luther King Jr. tried to build a movement against de facto segregation in the north, a racist assassinated him for his efforts. While nobody would argue against Medicare for All or any other reform that benefits low-income people as a whole, Rothstein made a good case for BLM beginning to struggle against segregated housing.

At the conclusion of their article, Kaplan and Valls call for reparations. While they admit that reparations might be a challenge to administer in terms of individual payments, they conceive of an alternative form that would compensate for past injustices on a group basis:

If there is a clear – and clearly unjust – structural inequality as a result of recent housing discrimination, but we cannot determine what is owed to whom in precise terms, it is perhaps best to think of reparations as being paid, at least in part, through policies whose overall effect will be to close the wealth gap, and particularly to close that the portion of the wealth gap that is based on home equity. For starters, the federal and state governments should devote greater resources to preventing and prosecuting the racial steering that we have good evidence to believe continues to take place. Furthermore, African Americans ought to be eligible for very favorable terms on mortgages, with very low interest rates and low or no down payment, subsidized by the government. Also, African Americans should be provided with opportunities that would lead to the creation of wealth through means beyond the housing market alone: access to good education, favorable terms for loans to start new businesses, etc. These measures, too, would help close the wealth gap that housing discrimination has done so much to create.

As sympathetic as I am to such a program, it is doubtful that it can be carried out given American capitalism's terminal illness. It is likely that the horrifying killings of Black people were not just the acts of "bad" cops. The culture of police departments has become more and more that of a colonial army trying to suppress a restive native population. As much as I would like to see BLM focus on racist housing, as Richard Rothstein proposed, there is little chance of it succeeding for the reason Kaplan and Valls put forward. Namely, too much water has passed under the bridge. The class differences between Black and white America have become so profound that the only recourse is a revolutionary struggle that can overcome the basis for inequality: private property and racism.

Only eight months into 2020, there have been unprecedented mobilizations against racial injustice that have been joined by millions of whites like San Mateo's Sophia Heath. With the capitalist system failing to meet young peoples' expectations, there will be and more sympathy for revolutionary change. When Karl Marx spoke of socialism, he had the elimination of the private ownership of the means of production in mind. That would be the start.

With the elimination of the profit motive, we began to lay the basis for solidarity between Blacks and whites for the first time in American history and unalienated work. In the past, hopes for a socialist future were the dream of an isolated and idealistic minority.

In the same way that the small minority of forward-thinking Americans opposed chattel slavery in the 1840s, a new generation will come to the fore to overthrow wage slavery in the future. Idealism alone will not be sufficient to bind this generation together. Those who join will have come to the grim realization that the current economic system can only produce misery and, finally, extinction. As Rosa Luxemburg put it, the choice is between socialism and barbarism.

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