

# Adolf Reed, "Tokens of the White Left"

For more than twenty years I refused on principle to use the phrase "the white left." I did not want to give any credence to the view, commonly expressed among black activists in the late 1960s and after, that the leftist critique of American society was somehow white people's property.

I maintained this resolve through SDS's 1969 proclamation of the Black Panther Party as the "vanguard of the black revolution" based only on the Panthers' willingness to align with whites- and subsequent gushes of Pantherphile exoticism, I kept it through the "separate black movement divides the working class" line, which was one crude "Marxist" alternative to examining black politics,

And I held on through similarly evasive Procrustean analyses, for example, casting the civil-rights movement as a "bourgeois democratic revolution." My resolve was unshaken through endless reification of the "black community" as a collective subject. Even when Frederic Jameson, editor of *Social Text*, told me early in the Reagan era that he had published an article that he knew was drivel and didn't even conform to the bibliographical format of the rest of the journal because he "wanted to publish something by a black author and that's what there was," I remained true.

I stayed patiently silent as the Democratic Socialists of America anointed one star *Black Voice* after another throughout the 1980s, with never a hint of concern about the anointed's institutional links to any sort of autonomous black political activity. And I endured the total lack of curiosity about Jesse Jackson's new political fame and what his antics since 1984 have to do with tensions and cleavages among blacks.

I'm ready to toss in the towel. When all is said and done, it really is all too much the white left. In far too many quarters, identifying with progressive politics is perfectly compatible with reliance on racial shorthand and, therefore, with the disposition to view Afro-American life as simultaneously opaque to those outside it (thus the need for black interpreters and line-bearers) and smoothly organic (with exceptions made for the odd, inauthentic "sellout" leaders).

Perhaps I am finally giving in to this view because I'm old and tired. Perhaps it's the result of attrition. Mostly, though, it seems that the farther the memory-much less the actuality-of real political movements recedes on the horizon, the worse this problem has become. I confess that it is quite dispiriting. It also makes the issue of blacks' role in the left a matter for real concern; more and more that role seems to be in a line stretching back at least to Melville's *Queequeg*, that is, to put whites in touch with their "deeper humanity."

This complaint has absolutely nothing to do with leadership, or even representation, in left institutions. It's about Jim Crow standards on the left: the suspension, when making judgments about black people and politics, of critical scrutiny, along with the tough-minded, Enlightenment skepticism that is the foundation of the left critique's unique power.

The key problem is that whites on the left don't want to confront complexity, tension, and ambivalence in black politics. In general, they simply do not see political differences among black people. They do not see that blacks are linked to social, political, and economic institutions in a variety of different ways, and that those different links, and the networks that flow from them, shape interests and ideological perception no less, and no less subtly, than among whites.

Because of racial stratification, black and white links differ. For instance, middle-class black people, largely because of housing segregation, are more likely than middle-class whites to live close to poor people. And black people, especially in the middle class, are more likely to be public employees, thanks to more nearly equal employment opportunities in the public sector.

Examining how the public-sector economy is woven into the logic of black politics should be a central project for the left. We need to take account of the fact that, more than ever, black individuals at all class levels are likely to have direct connections-themselves or through relatives, friends, and neighbors-with the operation of public institutions. And we need to assess what that means for shaping varying black political perceptions.

The fundamental principles of this sort of social structure, however, are the same for blacks and whites, and, therefore, they should not be incomprehensibly foreign to whites. It's astounding to see repeatedly in the left press the contrast between the subtlety and critical confidence with which writers dissect politics in Somalia, Bosnia, Indonesia, and Ukraine, and the total absence of those qualities in discussions of Afro-Americans.

As a result of this failing, attention to black politics on the left tends to revolve around thin and simplistic definitions of good guys and bad, "true" leaders and false. This distorts political judgment into a search for authenticity, hauntingly like white youth's quest in the 1960s for the most "authentic" blues-"pure" and untarnished by instrumentation, cultivated virtuosity, air-conditioned nightclubs, or indoor plumbing. (No Bobby Bland or Little Johnny Taylor need apply, just solitary old guys on porches of croppers' shacks in the Delta, playing acoustic guitars with neck bones.) It's also the exact meaning of exoticism and has horrible political consequences.

The "pure" black experience is monadic and antithetical to complexity in either orchestral arrangements or politics. Assigning authenticity requires "finding" the pulse of the community. (Actually, as with SDS and the Panthers, it requires designating the pulse-thus whites determine black legitimacy, as they have since Booker T. Washington's day at the turn of the century.)

This places a premium on articulate black people who will talk to the left. Whites tend to presume their inability-or tend not to want to expend the effort-to make critical judgments that might second-guess their designated black voices of authenticity, and therefore do not attend closely to the latter's substantive arguments. The result is that these "authentic" voices are treated mainly as personalities-without much regard to the political implications of the stances they project.

In fact, it is apparently possible to maintain one's status as Bearer of the Left's Authentic Race Line while articulating arguments that scarcely resemble views we normally think of as leftist. So Cornel West can retain his star status in the white left as he blathers on conspicuously about rampant "nihilism in black America," spouting breezy, warmed-over versions of the stock conservative-and utterly false-narrative of the fall from some earlier organic community, claiming that black Americans suffer from a "collective clinical depression," calling for a "politics of conversion" and cultivation of a "black love ethic" (is this Robert Schuller meets Barry White, or what?), as well as embracing the black conservatives' self-help rhetoric.

That West's explicit embrace of victim-blaming, pathologizing rhetoric about inner-city poor black people has provoked no real controversy in the left underscores the fact that the "noble savage" face of exoticism inevitably is only the obverse face of the "nasty savage" coin. The premise of blacks' deeper humanity is at bottom an assumption of their essentially different

humanity, and all it takes is a rude street encounter or a smashed car window to turn Martin Luther King, Jr., into Bigger Thomas as the avatar of the racial essence.

Ironically, this is the "othering" that the cultural-politics jockeys rattle on about from critique of one advertisement or Hottentot exhibit to the next. Yet they fail to grasp the dangers of their own breathless claims about the importance of race. Often, as with Michael Dyson's fawning endorsement of William Julius Wilson's line on black poverty, they also show an unexpected tolerance for talk about those "other," nasty savages.

This helps to explain why "underclass" imagery-properly spun with sanitizing allusions to ultimate sources in vaguely "structural" dynamics-has struck so many on the left as reasonable, as I've learned the hard way.

The simplistic, exoticizing approach to black politics is also susceptible to rhetoric about black people's intrinsic spirituality. This not only evokes hoary claims that blacks are closer to nature than whites, it also underwrites an increasingly troubling mystification of the church's role as the font of authenticity in black political life.

After black Americans fought from the moment of Emancipation for the right to vote, then for two-thirds of the next century against Jim Crow disfranchisement, it's incredible to hear the left's black stars routinely and blithely dismiss the ability to elect leaders and participate in shaping public institutions as less genuine than religious expression as a form of black political engagement.

This view's currency reflects the fact that several of its proponents- like West and Dyson-are ministers and thus propagandists for the church. But it floats on whites' inclination to see black Americans as spiritual folk, huddled organically around the camp meeting, communing with the racial essence through faith in things unseen.

That might seem harsh, but what else would explain the apparent absence of concern about church/state separation when West, Dyson, and others rhapsodize about religion as the basis of genuinely black political experience? Moreover, the effort to associate black legitimacy with the church is especially problematic now, when reactionary forces among black Americans are gaining steam precisely through church-based initiatives and jeremiads on the theme of moral crisis. These forces-in which church leaders are prominent-actively propagate moral and police repression as alternatives to humane social policy; calls for driving young people into churches, and jail if church fails, substitute for calls for job programs and decent educational opportunity.

In Cleveland and elsewhere, multi-denominational groups of influential black ministers have been agitating against gay-rights legislation, abortion, and gender equality. In many cities, black church-based groups are fighting sex education, contraceptives in the schools, and needle-exchange programs. And black church groups are becoming increasingly visible in the coalition of the Holy Roller Right.

Elevating church-based activity as most authentically black-besides overlooking the fact that most black people do not belong to any church -rationalizes the right's agenda of "privatization," and the ultimate dismantling of public functions. Encouraging church-based initiatives-which are inevitably inadequate responses to massive problems of state-supported dispossession - is part of the right's self-help program.

These are concerns that do not arise either in the patter of the left's black line-bearers or in

response to them. They should be at a minimum, topics for strategic discussion, particularly in an otherwise rigorously secular left.

The prevailing take on black politics is part of a deep cynicism. As we spin further and further away from mundane political struggles, there is ever less pressure on the star black voices to engage politics concretely. Instead of analysis of the way that black people and politics connect with the institutional exercise of power, we get either utterly predictable rehearsals of standard bromides and litanies-reminiscent of a Las Vegas act gone stale ("we need to build coalitions of the oppressed [here include a string of groups] that are multiracial but guard against racism, sexism, homophobia," et cetera, ad nauseam)-or the glib sophistries that fly under the "cultural-politics" flag.

Panegyrics on behalf of the intrinsic worth and significance of rap music, the repackaging of 1940s zoot suits and other youth fads as political opposition, incessant nattering about "positionality," representations in popular culture, and "voices" heard and silenced - these are by now formulaic exercises, as politically empty and wrong-headed as they are superficially clever. They replace in the left's public forum careful attention to the intricate social and institutional relations that shape black political resources and practice.

They also reduce to a discourse on how white people think about black people and how black people supposedly feel about it, buttressing a suspicion that this is all most whites care much about anyway, when it comes to deciphering what's up with black Americans.

So what can be done? Is there any useful way out of this situation I've described? The reflex is to layout a detailed way of thinking about black people and politics. Until recently, I'd certainly have acted on that reflex. Now all it seems sensible to say is that the most important warrants are: (1) to insist on focusing discussion of black politics concretely, in relation to government, public policy, and political economy and (2) to presume that political dynamics operating among blacks are not totally alien, that is, they are understandable without the need for special native interpreters.

Beyond that we'll just have to wait and see what happens, won't we?