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## Review of Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism

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***Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism.* Touré Reed. London, UK: Verso Books, 2020, paper, 224 pp. ISBN 978-1-7866-3438-2.**

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*Toward Freedom* is Touré F. Reed's sustained response to Ta-Nehisi Coates' argument for reparations. On Reed's reading, central to Coates's argument is the claim that 'universal' liberal programs intended to benefit all citizens have been tried and have failed to alleviate the economic disparities afflicting African Americans in the United States. White racism is too ineluctable a force, the argument goes, woven into the institutional and conceptual fabric of the nation in such a way that such policies will invariably simply reinforce existing disparities. Reed waits until the last chapter of the book to bring his argument to focus on Coates, there giving his argument for reparations careful critical assessment.

Before taking on Coates directly, and at the same time showing how Coates and Barack Obama represent complementary modes of accommodation to neo-liberalism, Reed devotes three chapters to demonstrating how Coates' basic claim is false. The first chapter tracks how New Deal era legislation opened the opportunity for Black leaders to engage in more militant tactics to advance the interests of African Americans.

During the New Deal era organizations like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the National Urban League, the New Negro Alliance, the National Negro Congress, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People began to align themselves with labor organizations to find common cause with white workers in a shared struggle for better wages and working conditions. Under these circumstances the focus of African American organizational leadership, Reed argues, shifted from matters of disenfranchisement and segregation to poverty and unemployment. He treats a statement by A. Phillip Randolph, President of the National Negro Congress from 1936-1940, as representative of this development: "no black worker can be free so long as the white worker is a slave and by the same token, no white worker is certain of security while his black brother is bound" (p. 39).

Reed's account in this chapter responds indirectly to Coates's claim that the New Deal was, on balance, a huge lost opportunity for African Americans because racist policies excluded them from New Deal programs meant to benefit working people. In this first chapter Reed makes three points, to which he'll return repeatedly. One, the idea became widespread among Black American leaders at the time that shared economic interests between black and white workers would enable the formation of inter-ethnic coalitions. While some labor unions rejected black workers as members, there were others that welcomed them – the CIO being the example that Reed most emphasizes. Next, these same leaders came increasingly to accept the idea that labor action and political organizing based on such coalitions was the most effective way to address the problems of Black poverty and unemployment. Finally, New Deal legislative initiatives like the NLRA that encouraged such developments were made possible by a reconstituted legal and political environment that both accepted and enabled the legitimacy of state interventions into labor and housing markets. A theme that unfolds in later chapters is that the subsequent erosion of these enabling conditions is a crucial causal factor that accounts for the worsening situation of working-class black Americans.

In the book's second chapter Reed examines how the sharp rightward shift in American politics brought about by the Cold War is accompanied by a parallel change in the way the problem of African American poverty and unemployment is conceptualized. The same political and cultural developments that brought about a decline in the labor militancy present during the 1930s and 1940s was accompanied by the displacement of what Reed refers to as "materialist" accounts of racial inequities by "culturalist interpretations." The main figure here is Oscar Handlin, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian of immigration. Handlin's framing of the causes of poverty and unemployment abandoned earlier ideas that ethnic differences were based on fixed and biologically inherited traits. Instead, he defined ethnic culture in terms of a population's shared norms, values, and experiences and argued that this culture shaped the form and strength of a given group's institutional life. According to Handlin, Reed says, "ethnic groups rose and fell on the strength of their cultural attributes and the institutions that regulated individual behavior" (p. 56).

It is not hard to see the affinities between Handlin's thinking and the "culture of poverty" thesis that came to prominence with the Moynihan report on the Negro family (the subject of the next chapter). Before moving to that topic, Reed first argues that Handlin's thinking was more congenial to American scholars, pundits and policy makers because it offered an alternative to class-based analyses of race and inequality, which were falling into disfavor in the political climate of the Cold War. The crucial consequence of this development for Reed is that explanations for social inequities became divorced from economic developments. Reed's review of Handlin's thinking further develops the groundwork for his critique of Coates' argument for reparations because Handlin appears to be a seminal source for assumptions that have become dominant in contemporary anti-racist thinking – the supposition, namely, that ethnic group membership, rather than shared material interest, is a more appropriate and effective basis for pursuing a legislative agenda intended to redress racial inequities. Reed argues that this reframing of the political task also exercised a profound influence on the Black Power movement that emerged in the 1960s. In his discussion of Stokely Carmichael & Charles Hamilton's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Reed contends that their emphasis on group solidarity as a necessary precondition for black advancement is best understood as an outgrowth of Handlin's theoretical framework.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* represents, on Reed's account, the next step in the development of causal diagnoses of African American poverty and inequality that dissociates the weakening of African American social institutions from the specific economic circumstances facing the community. The problem facing low-income African Americans, as Reed sees it, was that automation and mechanization were increasingly eliminating the good paying, unionized, low-skill jobs that had disproportionately sustained African American workers in Eastern, Midwestern and West Coast cities. In other words, the root of the problem is to be found in transformations in the economic structures confronting low wage workers in general, transformations that disproportionately affected African Americans. Moynihan's report also offers a "structural analysis" of African American poverty. But the conception of structure that he employed was rooted not in political economy, but instead in the framework of ethnic pluralism first articulated by Handlin. Moynihan's innovation was to claim that the long history of racial discrimination had damaged the structure of the social institutions that had regulated the behavior of poor African Americans and shaped black culture. Reed suggests that it is unsurprising that anti-racists like Coates would want to rehabilitate Moynihan's work because their own analyses share the same basic premises as Moynihan's approach.

Moynihan was subjected to fierce criticism for having misjudged the resilience of African American community structures and for “blaming the victim.” Despite the criticisms, Reed argues, the policy implications of the Moynihan report were implemented in War on Poverty programs. Since the problem had been identified as weakness or failure of basic institutions of the Black community arising from historical trauma, Great Society programs emphasized training, education, and service agency interventions aimed at remediating the alleged family and cultural failings of poor African American communities. According to Reed, this approach misdiagnosed the actual causes of the problems facing African American communities. He contends that these causes are to be traced to the impact of automation and deindustrialization, as well as to shifts in the political climate that favored neoliberal growth policies over state interventions (on the model of the WPA, the CCC, and state support for unionization) to provide working people with a bulwark against macroeconomic transformations. On his account, the disassociation of cultural explanations from economic conditions virtually guaranteed the inefficacy of Great Society programs and the War on Poverty.

In the final – and by far longest chapter – Reed carries out his dissection of Coates’s argument for reparations as the only appropriate response to the current difficulties of low-income African Americans. Reed’s analysis shows that Coate’s account is in the grip of the same framework prioritizing ethnic identity as the engine of social adaptation and change that hamstrung Moynihan’s analysis. Coates’s “racial ontology” (as Reed calls it) leads him to misinterpret the political and economic dynamics of the New Deal era. Coates insists that White racism was responsible for the exclusion of Black workers from important New Deal programs and for their consequent loss of income and opportunities for wealth accumulation. Reed argues that the same exclusions also affected a large number of white workers and that they were implemented not because of racist bias but because private property owners sought to protect their control over their assets. Blacks were disproportionately excluded, Reed acknowledges, because of their overrepresentation among the low-income workers and renters affected by the policy exclusions.

Reed argues that in “The Case for Reparations” Coates interprets the Johnson Administration’s War on Poverty as an attempt to address black inequality through *universal programs* which failed because they did not take into account the distinctiveness of black poverty, which arises from the inexorable nature of White prejudice. Coates’ claim, Reed replies, is based on a fundamental misreading of the theoretical framework informing the Johnson Administration’s policies. Great Society programs were *premised* on the idea that African Americans suffered disproportionately from poverty and inequality *because* of the growing weakness of family and community structures – a problem alleged to be specific to African Americans because of their unique experience of slavery and subsequent institutionalized oppression.

An interesting twist to Reed’s examination of Coates’s case for reparations is a parallel discussion of Obama’s “postracial” policy agenda. On the one hand, the Obama administration’s policies were based on the idea that disparate outcomes for African Americans were the result of slow economic growth, the historic legacy of racism, and the cultural deficiencies of poor blacks. Coates rejects these claims in favor of his racial ontology, according to which White racism is the defining feature of the history and institutional structure of the United States and is the primary cause of black suffering. While Coates seeks to draw a clear distinction between his perspective and Obama’s, Reed insists that the two share much more in common than Coates acknowledges.

Both abstract African American poverty from the context of economic policies and developments that harmed *all* working-class Americans, but disproportionately impacted low-income blacks – deindustrialization, the retrenchment of the public sector (which both served and employed African Americans) and the decline of the union movement. As a result, according to Reed, both Obama and Coates “have taken up complementary roles as black emissaries of neoliberalism” (p. 103).

By situating Coates’s “Case for Reparations” (broadly construed) in the context of historical, economic, and theoretical developments during and since the New Deal, Reed performs a real service in illuminating the unacknowledged conservatism of Coates’s account. Indeed, Reed shows how Coates’s ontology of ineluctable white racism along with his rejection of the possibility of genuinely universal state programs leads him to a position strikingly like the politics of clientage and petition pursued by African American organizations *prior* to the Great Depression. Coates’s case for reparations amounts to a giant step backwards, reviving what is in effect a politics of pleading that culminates, finally, in historical and conceptual incoherence. Given Coates’s racial ontology, it is implausible to suppose that a white electorate would vote to tax themselves for a government program from which they would gain no benefit. For that reason, his call for reparations amounts to little more than an exercise in symbolic action.

*Toward Freedom* is a short book, so it can’t do everything. While showing that Coates’s account of history is incorrect, particularly in relation to the benefits that black Americans did gain from New Deal legislation, what Reed doesn’t do is show how state intervention on the model of the WPA, the CCC, and support for unionization would be of much assistance in the context of a neoliberal economic order. The New Deal programs that Reed invokes functioned to protect workers from a severe down cycle in an economy that would in time recover the kinds of low skill, high pay, unionized jobs that (Reed suggests) disproportionately supported African Americans. But such jobs would seem to be gone for good in a global, neoliberal economic order. Given that context, New Deal style programs would seem to amount to a *permanent* make work solution. It is unclear whether something like this is what Reed has in mind, or if he has some other kinds of state interventions in mind. But this would be a question for a different book.