

## The Cost of Race Reductionism: Review of *Toward Freedom* by Touré F. Reed

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Touré Reed published *Toward Freedom* on February 25, 2020, just before the tumultuous onslaught of events that revealed the deepest extents of American inequality. In his work, Reed argues that true justice and equality for African Americans is impeded by the practice of race reductionism and the protection of neoliberal enterprise. He asserts that the failure to rectify the injustices at the core of America's foundation results from ignoring the inextricable link between race and class and the inability to condemn capitalism's role as the root cause of racial injustice.

*Toward Freedom* puts forth its case against race reductionism at a critical point of relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted Black people, has been accompanied by a series of police killings of Black people, including the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. In the midst of the pandemic, the 2020 Democratic primary election ended with a coalescence of corporatist Democrats bolstering Joe Biden's nomination over Bernie Sanders's popular progressive campaign. In the year following the publication of his book, the neoliberal discourse Reed condemns for divorcing race from class was amplified once again, even as the extremity of racial and economic inequalities were revealed. Reed's critical analysis of America's race reductionist approach to facing systemic inequality ultimately foreshadows the consequences of its inadequacies—hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths due to the prioritization of capital over human life during the pandemic.

Reed begins *Toward Freedom* with a recapitulation of the 2016 Democratic primary, which was “condensed around two distinct visions of social justice” (17), Hillary Clinton's embrace of neoliberal upward redistribution and Bernie Sanders's public good framework. Reed uses this contrast to show how the public good economic policies of the 1930s bolstered the American middle class—albeit the white American middle class—and increased the financial welfare of many American families. Through comprehensive policies like the National Labor Relations Act and the Social Security Act, workers were afforded “a much-strengthened right to collective bargaining; insulation from financial hardship...; a forty-hour work week; and a floor below which workers' wages could not fall” (12). Reed effectively asserts the merit of public good-oriented economic policy, showing its strong correlation with the improvement of the American quality of life. Reed then dives directly into the Black progressive movements of the era, which emphasized labor activism as a vital means to achieving racial equality.

As Reed explains, Black activists during the New Deal era identified the advancement of the working class through unionization, public works, and redistributive programs as the key to uplifting Black Americans. Although the exclusion of Black people from the benefits of the New Deal policies precluded them from significant economic advancement, “the so-called Depression decade was fertile ground for several political, social and intellectual developments that would eventually blossom into the insurgent black political activism of the 1950s and 1960s” (48). Labor-oriented goals were originally a cornerstone of civil rights agendas that sought material improvement in the lives of Black people, Reed writes. However, the unity of Black civil rights and labor movements splintered as the rightward drift of American politics coincided with the rise of ethnic pluralism, resulting in the dissolution of discourse that addressed racial and

economic inequality as interconnected forces. The focus of civil rights efforts shifted toward antidiscrimination policy, voting rights, and integration as racism was identified “as a psychological defect rather than a symptom of class exploitation” (89).

After recounting the leftist politics and labor focuses of Black activists in the New Deal era, Reed describes how, after World War II, the liberal discourse surrounding racial inequality treated it as a moral dilemma rather than a socioeconomic class conflict. This attitude intensified during the Cold War as opposition to leftist ideology became increasingly hostile and “policymakers bound their opposition to racism to a human rights discourse that rejected economic security—the right to a job, a living wage, health care and so on—as a right...and, instead, identified values consistent with liberal capitalism—the right to personal expression, private property, religious freedom—as universal rights” (43). The embracement of race reductionism and neoliberalism designated inequality as the result of cultural and character deficiencies rather than structural socioeconomic flaws. These attitudes were reflected in legislation, including The Housing Act of 1949, which demobilized the labor movement by converting the working class into a petite bourgeoisie (68), and President Johnson’s War on Poverty, which failed to reduce poverty because of its lack of redistributive programs (102).

Reed then discusses how the institutional policies of the War on Poverty, meant to “redress the character deficiencies of the poor” (64), were encouraged by the ethnic pluralism put forth in the Moynihan report, which “argued that social pathologies afflicting a stratum of poor blacks would likely undercut antipoverty initiatives that failed to account for the cultural damage inflicted upon blacks by slavery and Jim Crow” (58). This philosophy ushered the War on Poverty’s devolution into an assault on poor people through the cruelty of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration as well as cuts to public housing and social welfare programs.

Reed’s analysis of the devolution of civil rights activism from an intersectional class movement to a redress of lower-class character deficiencies highlights how the nation’s perception of racism as a psychological and moral ill is an incomplete account of the causes of inequality. This misdiagnosis ultimately results in inadequate policies that fail to ameliorate disparities and instead protect oppressive institutions. Reed stresses this testament in his final chapter, where he brings his argument to contemporary relevance by analyzing the shortcomings of author Ta-Nehisi Coates and President Barack Obama, the “Twins of neoliberal benign neglect” (168). Both Obama and Coates are agents of the race reductionist camp, he argues, although their views are diametrically opposed. Reed explains that “whereas President Obama’s soaring post-racialism licensed the continuation of liberal indifference to the plight of economically marginal people via underclass metaphors, Coates’s post-post racial commitment to racial ontology signs off on white liberal hand-wringing and public displays of guilt as alternatives to practicable solutions to disparities” (103). He asserts that both Obama and Coates fail to acknowledge how the exploitation of the laboring class has disproportionately burdened Black people. Instead, they focus on prejudice and cultural deficiencies as the drivers of inequity and the Black plight. This is clear in Coates’s own writing, which “attribute[s] persistent racial disparities to white Americans’ seemingly metaphysical commitment to racism” (Aspholm 2021, 1), as he defends that “white supremacy was a force in and of itself, a vector often intersecting with class, but also operating independent of it” (Coates 2021, 1).

The result of both Obama and Coates’s race reductionism is that African Americans are presented with “symbolic or rhetorical wins as alternatives to substantive improvements in their material lives” (109). This encompasses Reed’s main point: focusing on antidiscrimination, diversity, and entrepreneurial uplift without state intervention in economic exploitation through

redistributive policies, universal welfare programs, and public works has minimal material benefit for African Americans who are continuously disadvantaged by the workings of capitalism. Until this is realized and addressed there will be no progress toward equality and justice.

Reed's case against race reductionism comes during a period of heightened focus on racism in America. Outrage over police brutality has reignited concern with the country's unforgivable history of racial oppression. However, as represented by Biden's win over Sanders in the 2020 primary, emphasis has been placed on an approach to anti-racism that ignores the faults of capitalism. Pundits emphasize increasing diversity, cultural awareness, and representation to eradicate white supremacy. Meanwhile, substantive initiatives such as increasing the minimum wage, abolishing the prison industrial complex, and reallocating funds to community outreach and development are deemed as exceedingly radical. Without employing such policies, anti-discriminatory movements dismiss the economic underpinnings of racial inequality that the leaders in the African American freedom struggle of the 1930s and 1940s recognized fully. In their fight, they knew that their oppression was rooted in the capitalist necessity of an exploited class. They understood that their own liberation and elevation could come only in the absence of all capitalist exploitation, and so their movements were broad-based class coalitions across racial divides that aimed for the material improvement of their living and laboring conditions.

The approach Reed advocates for in *Toward Freedom* must be taken if any progress toward a more just and equal society is to be made. In the wake of a devastating global crisis that has left the most vulnerable to face the worst suffering, a reckoning with the political economy that has allowed a preventable catastrophe to wreak such havoc must come. *Toward Freedom* needs to be widely read so that the faults of race reductionism and capitalism do not claim the lives of even more Americans.

## References

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