

# Adolph Reed's premature burial of the U.S. Left

March 27, 2014

Back in the day, (a cliché, I know) Adolph Reed wrote a waspish piece in the *Village Voice*, “Liberals, I Do Despise,” which made something of a splash and was hard to refute — this when the *Voice* was widely read, not a freebie and well-worth paying for — as he attacked a coterie of Clintonistas for “a politics motivated by the desire for proximity to the ruling class and a belief in the basic legitimacy of its power and prerogative.” He called it “a politics which, despite all its idealist puffery and feigned nobility, will sell out any allies or egalitarian objectives in pursuit of gaining the Prince's ear.”

Jump ahead 18 years and Reed is still banging on the same tin drum. Only now he targets the entire left.

In a lead article in the March 2014 *Harpers*, which still charges and where Reed's polemic “Nothing Left: The Long, Slow Surrender of American Liberals” is behind a pay wall, Reed slathers scorn broadly, damning as sycophantic anyone who isn't Adolph Reed, complicit in a progressive movement that not only failed but failed because it lost its vision. He decries a debased liberalism that accepts not only capitalism but also the austerity tenets of neoliberal ideology and extreme self-limits on any sort of thoroughgoing reforms; its preferred sport is inside baseball. It's not the hegemonic power of the American imperium at home that forecloses options, divides movements, and pauperizes a generation. For Reed it's the left's lack of imagination as it politicks for weak tea and plays fantasy baseball. His charge of no guts and no brains equaling no hope has been his leitmotif for a generation.

If I sound contemptuous of his take, it's not because he's wrong. As description of the dominant trend in progressive politics it is sadly spot-on, though painted with a brush so broad it could cover a parade ground. Instead of a surgical strike, his is a random drive-by shooting. It's his fatalistic view that the condition is both universal and virtually permanent that makes the piece not just dour but unhelpful.

Lenin is said to have called Western liberals “useful idiots.” He didn't, but it's a good talking point, and Reed might as well have used the phrase himself when he calls the left that doesn't ritually rag on Obama as useless.

He's not wrong. How many Charlie Brown moments do some people need?

The arriviste coterie of Wall Street lords unveiled as Obama's economic team less than 12 hours after the polls closed in 2008 should have been a fire alarm, and the fact that it wasn't does speak to the blindness of many liberals and the gutlessness of some on the left who even as late as Occupy wouldn't criticize President Obama, the austerity-enabler-in-chief, so as not to alienate leaders in the black community. That was pure paternalism in denigrating the capacity of black Americans, among this administration's greatest victims, to understand how the new regime was failing them.

Reed is not wrong in slamming the Obama mythos, where

"Confusion and critical paralysis prompted by the racial imagery of Obama's election prevented even sophisticated intellectuals like [Slavo] Žižek from concluding that Obama was only another

Clintonite Democrat — no more, no less. It is how Obama could be sold, even within the left, as a hybrid of Martin Luther King Jr. and Neo from *The Matrix*..... In this sense his election is most fundamentally an expression of the limits of the left in the United States — its decline, demoralization, and collapse."

He's not wrong to note that "The movement for racial justice has shifted its focus from inequality to 'disparity,' while neatly evading any critique of the structures that produce inequality."

He's also not wrong about a sizably subdued and housebroken labor leadership, though he gives no notice to what some do right or what insurgents in both the public and private sectors are building in the way of democratic and militant unionism. Even a nod to the militant Chicago Teachers Union and its battles with the city's mayor and ex-Clinton legbreaker Rahm Emanuel would have given his rap needed perspective.

He overstates in saying that "social activists have made their peace with neoliberalism and adjusted their horizons accordingly" and conflates foundation-funded organizations with rank-and-file movements. His writing that "dominant figures in the antiwar movement have long since accepted the framework of American military interventionism" is over the top; the names of alleged offenders would help.

But when he cites Russell Jacoby's astute observation in *The End of Utopia*, that "the left ineluctably retreats to smaller ideas, seeking to expand the options within the existing society," he's descriptively and devastatingly right about the contemporary liberal wing of the Democratic Party at least.

John Conyer's oft-introduced jobs bill -- never embraced by the party leadership even when Democrats held the House -- should be emblematic of a series of broadly supported legislative initiatives, not simply the one-shot product of a solitary valiant, aging war horse.

So Reed's description of a liberal malaise and barely consequential fights over fewer and smaller gains, no matter how acidly drawn or exaggerated he makes it, isn't wrong. It's the overkill that minimizes what actually occurs in a fight-back on the ground that makes Reed's take overblown.

Here it's worth citing his conclusion, which is where the piece could take off, but instead sputters.

"The crucial tasks for a committed left in the United States now are to admit that no politically effective force exists and to begin trying to create one. This is a long-term effort, and one that requires grounding in a vibrant labor movement. Labor may be weak or in decline, but that means aiding in its rebuilding is the most serious task for the American left. Pretending some other option exists is worse than useless. There are no magical interventions, shortcuts, or technical fixes. We need to reject the fantasy that some spark will ignite the People to move as a mass. We must create a constituency for a left program — and that cannot occur via MSNBC or blog posts or *The New York Times*. It requires painstaking organization and building relationships with people outside the Beltway and comfortable leftist groves..... The message could not be clearer."

Actually, it could. It's his lack of focus on any real social movements beyond lip service to a rebuilt labor fight-back or any recognition that waging class war in the heart of the American empire proceeds, however fitfully -- it's in the nature of capital to accrete resistance -- and will always be imperfect and tentative. Anyone arguing the truth that "a constituency for a left program needs building" or that the task requires, as it does, "painstaking organization and building relationships with people outside the Beltway and comfortable leftist groves" has to include what goes on now and incorporate a rigorous understanding of what didn't work before, and why. Reed may know

movement history, but it's not evidenced here. Where's the context? Where's the painstaking analysis of what was and is? Did a movement Reed describes early in the piece as "dynamic" for nearly all of the last century because it was "grounded in the belief that unrestrained capitalism generated unacceptable social costs" fail because its beliefs evaporated? Or because in the face of capital regnant something trumps nothing?

(Note: It also requires a bit of truth telling on Reed's part. Our Jeremiah jumped from wanting in the 1990s to build a Labor Party that studiously avoided running its own candidates to embracing Hillary Clinton against Obama in the 2008 party primary. As they text on Twitter, WTF?)

Reed's notion of good program informing good practice is also tricky. Granted a different historical period, Rosa Luxemburg's 1904 injunction against fetishizing organization and program is instructive. She wrote that "the mistakes that are made by a truly revolutionary workers' movement are, historically speaking, immeasurably more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best possible 'Central Committee'." I would add that you can't have "the best possible Central Committee" until that movement learns its lessons in practice.

The truth is that corporate America will always hold the whip hand until that hand is broken. To coin a well-worn socialist phrase attributed to the old electoral socialist Victor Berger (who in radical circles is still written off unfairly as a hopeless reformist) "the only fight that matters winning is the last one."

An interview with Reed shortly after his Harper's piece was posted appears as a podcast here.

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