

# FIGHTING WORDS

## ADOLPH REED'S CRUSADE AGAINST THE NEW BLACK INTELLECTUALS

CORNEL WEST CONSIDERS HIM mean-spirited. William Julius Wilson prefers not to appear in public with him. Manning Marable characterized one of his recent articles as scurrilous. The object of their scorn is not Charles Murray or Dinesh D'Souza, but Adolph Reed Jr., a professor of political science and American studies at Northwestern University who has emerged as an acerbic commentator on matters pertaining to race, politics, and the role of the intellectual. His combative rhetorical style and contrarian sensibility have won him admirers—*Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt calls him “the smartest person of any race, class, or gender writing on race, class, and gender”—as well as powerful enemies, including some of the most influential figures in the academy.

Until the early 1990s, Reed was best known as the author of *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of*

*Purpose in Afro-American Politics* (Yale, 1986), a scathing, unsentimental assessment from the left of Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign. But Reed's visibility has been steadily rising since then, thanks to his frequent contributions to *The Village Voice*, *The Nation*, and *The Progressive*, and most of all to his incendiary polemic in the April 11, 1995, issue of the *Voice* titled “What Are the Drums Saying, Booker? The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual.”

Reed's essay was a hand grenade hurled into the burgeoning debate concerning the “new black intellectuals,” whose emergence had been chronicled in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Republic*, and other publications. In particular, the essay was directed at five well-known individuals: Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, bell hooks, and Robin Kelley, a

professor of history at New York University. Reed took issue with both the quality of their scholarship and the way they attempt to straddle the academic and public spheres: “West, Dyson, et al. use the public intellectual pose to claim authority both as certified, world-class elite academics and as links to an extra-academic blackness,” he wrote. “In the process, they are able to skirt the practical requirements of either role—to avoid both rigorous, careful intellectual work and protracted, committed political action.”

After assailing West (“Bill Bradley's favorite conduit to the Mind of the Negro”), Gates (a “freelance advocate for black political centrism” yet “the most intellectually probing and most consistent of the group”), and Dyson and hooks (“hustlers, blending bombast, clichés, psychobabble, and lame guilt tripping in service to the ‘pay



ADOLPH REED JR.

me' principle"), Reed contrasted them with an earlier group of black intellectuals, including Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the young Ralph Bunche—as well as contemporary figures such as Lani Guinier and Julian Bond—who participated in a common debate aimed at “stimulating, directing, and taking political action.” The figures hailed by the media as black public intellectuals, Reed averred, “are more like the Super Friends than the Frankfurt School or the Howard University social scientists of the 1930s.”

Not mincing words, Reed added: “[Their] stance...is by and large just that—not a stand but a posture. Can the reader familiar with their work recall without hesitation a specific critique, a concrete formulation—an extended argument that is neither airily abstract nor cozily compatible with what passes for common sense at the moment? I'd bet not, because in this arena prominence of author counts more than weight of utterance.”

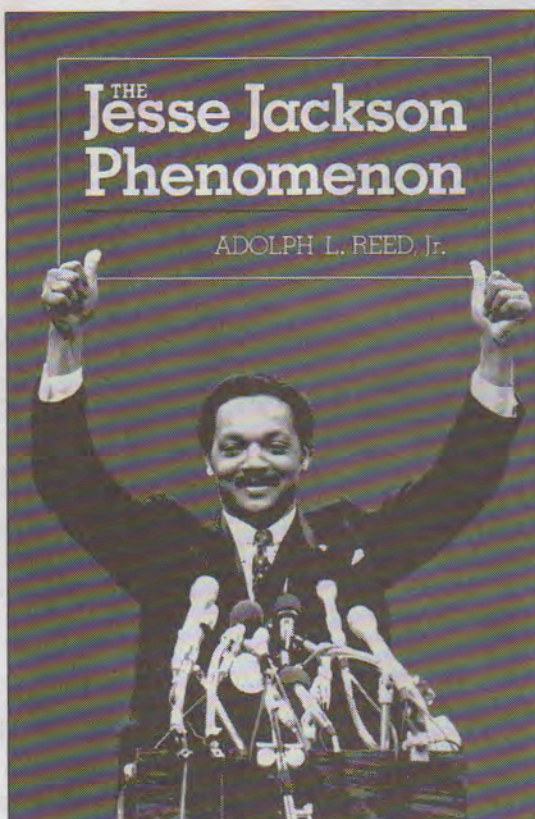
Of course, to conduct political debate in such a bruising manner is bound to provoke an angry reaction—not least because accusations of posturing and opportunism can easily be turned against the one who makes them. Reed himself works simultaneously as a professor, a journalist, and a grassroots political activist. And in doing so, he runs the risk of falling into his own trap—of always being, in his words, “from and on the way to the other place.” In his recent writings, Reed has attempted to strip the new black intellectuals debate of its celebrity veneer—removing it from the realm of the glossy magazines and glare of Charlie Rose's studio—and to refocus it on concrete political engagement. But to his critics, it is not clear that professional success and political virtue can be so starkly opposed.

**IN A** letter to the *Voice*, Kelley called the article outrageous and attributed it to jealousy. Writing in *Z* magazine, hooks accused Reed of

deliberately ignoring the feminist dimensions of her work. But it was Manning Marable, director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University, who offered the most comprehensive reply. In *New Politics*, a small “journal of socialist thought,” Marable agreed with some aspects of Reed's essay—for instance, his contention that many black intellectuals lack viable constituencies within the African-American community—but criticized the way it mistakenly lumped together scholars of varying interests and political orientations. Moreover, at

intellectuals in previous generations, people who actually did incur substantial risks.” Marable, his temperature rising, countered that Reed is not interested in establishing a constructive dialogue, that his tone echoes the extreme language of the right, and that he is “out of step” with black America in his harsh criticisms of Louis Farrakhan and former NAACP head Benjamin Chavis.

The exchange highlighted fissures within the African-American left intelligentsia and raised a number of salient questions, including: What precisely is the obligation of the engaged black intellectual? To what extent should his or her activities be tied to grassroots organizing? How should such individuals react to the heightened popularity of Farrakhan? And the exchange also revealed that Reed's quarrel with the black intelligentsia derives from his larger quarrel with what he calls “the notion of a ‘black community’ and the rhetoric of authenticity that comes with it.” In Reed's view, repeated use of the term by politicians, intellectuals, and demagogues glosses over the stratification and complexity of African-American life while reinforcing an imaginary image of civil rights-era grassroots clout. Reed's unfavorable assessment of African-American politics rests on the idea that the mainstream black elite since the late 1960s has consolidated a “racially assertive but still accommodationist” politics that traded activism for backroom negotiation. Out of that demobilization rose a leadership-based



a time when conservatives have made a “strategic decision to delegitimize the liberal-left black intelligentsia,” Marable argued that Reed's piece was “irresponsible.”

The Reed-Marable debate went several more rounds in *New Politics*. “The notion that we must take special care to protect and insulate from criticism a group of celebrity professors with safe, cushy jobs because the right-wing bogeyman might get them,” Reed retorted, “is offensive and demeaning to the exemplary legacy of lively critical debate among black

model, rich in contrived symbolism, grounded in the “mythos of the singular Black Leader,” and reinforced by films such as Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* and the cults of personality surrounding Farrakhan and, to a lesser extent, Jesse Jackson.

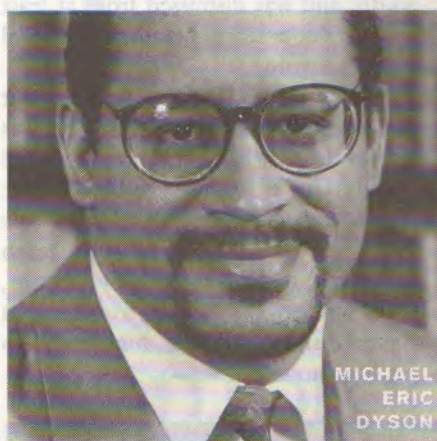
Indeed, Reed's opposition to hero worship and race loyalty is nowhere more evident than in his treatment of Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam (NOI). In a two-part article in *The Nation* in 1991 that dissected Farrakhan's conservatism, patriarchal vision, and bootstrap ideology, Reed

demanding to know why the civil rights establishment and other sectors of liberal black opinion had, up until then, expressed little public concern about Farrakhan's "protofascist" tendencies. The *Nation* article, considered by many to be the definitive portrait of the NOI leader, launched Reed's journalistic career.

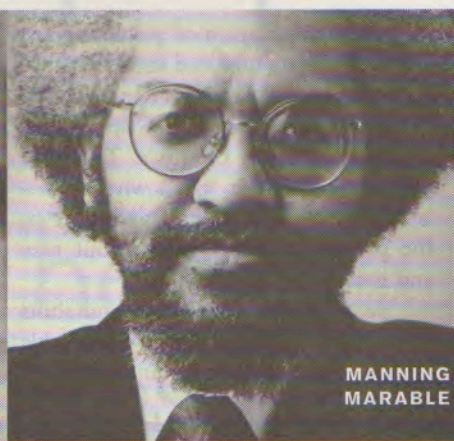
Several years later, when Manning Marable called for an open dialogue with Farrakhan in the wake of the Million Man March, Reed was vociferously opposed to any contact with the minister. He cited Farrakhan's recent defense of the dictatorships in Nigeria and Zaire and insisted that Marable's view was "stunningly unprincipled" because, in effect, it called for "appeasement" of an individual Reed considers dangerous.

fundamental disagreement about the role of the church in black politics, a subject they publicly debated at a forum sponsored by Yale's Black Graduate Network back in 1987. Reed devoted an entire chapter of *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon* to an attack on what he sees as the church's duplicitous role in African-American history. West, on the other hand, has always insisted that the church is an essential component of grassroots mobilization. (Harvard's Martin Kilson is quick to note that West's involvement in activist congregations in Trenton and New Brunswick undercuts Reed's depiction of West as politically disengaged.) The feud escalated in 1991 when *The New York Times Magazine* ran a profile of West in which Reed was quoted as saying,

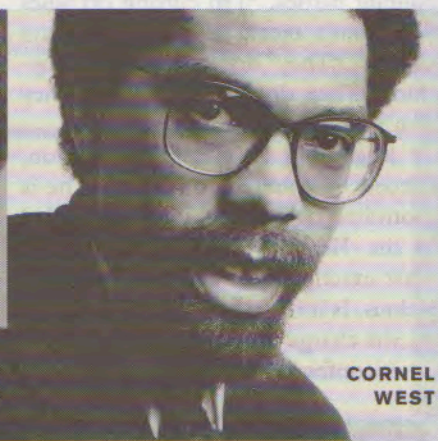
That Reed seems to derive excessive pleasure from the vilification of others—especially those on the liberal left—is a complaint frequently lodged against him. His rough treatment of Marable is illustrative. In *New Politics* the Columbia professor made a passing reference to his own role as an active leader in the National Black Political Assembly (NBPA), a coalition of black nationalists, in the 1970s. In preparing for the final round of the exchange, Reed got on the phone with some old acquaintances to inquire about Marable's participation in the NBPA and duly reported back that "no one has Marable's recollection of his prominence." "My point in all this," Reed wrote by way of explanation, "isn't to establish my bona fides as a Long Marcher and to one-up Marable's



MICHAEL  
ERIC  
DYSON



MANNING  
MARABLE



CORNEL  
WEST

## THE FIGURES HAILED BY THE MEDIA AS THE BLACK PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS, REED SAYS, "ARE MORE LIKE THE SUPER FRIENDS THAN THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL."

TO SOME EXTENT, Reed's quarrel with the new black intellectuals is the result of a long, complicated history with them. He has never met Dyson—whom he ridicules as the "Reverend Hiphop Porkchop"—but he and hooks overlapped at Yale. He maintains warm relations with Gates, he says, but feels a special antipathy for Cornel West, whose involvement in the black church goes against the grain of Reed's own anticlerical sensibilities.

Indeed, the long-running feud between Reed and West is rooted in a

"Cornel's work tends to be 1,000 miles wide and about two inches deep."

"In so many ways brother Adolph is a sad case of one who has squandered so much of his promise and talent primarily owing to the fact that there is so much hatred and contempt in his writings—and, I suspect, in his life, too," West says. "That's sad, because when you read his early work in the journals *Endarch* and *Telos*, you had some fascinating formulations at work. Owing to whatever it is—insecurity, intellectual laziness—he just ended up doing this flat journalistic stuff."

political history, although I confess to relief at giving in to a long repressed impulse to set the record straight."

What may be most surprising about the war of words between Reed and Marable is the fact that they have much in common. Both are socialists—Marable is best known for his 1983 book *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*. Both harbor a dislike of black nationalism and the rightward trajectory of the Democratic Party. And both occupy a narrow corner of the political spectrum, one whose ranks are not exactly swelling. While the differences between them are real, each

would probably agree that their time could be more effectively spent. After all, while they were insulting each other in the pages of *New Politics* (circulation 3,000), Congress was crafting draconian welfare legislation.

**REED IS** sitting in his spacious office at Northwestern University, which is strewn with books, newspapers, and leftist periodicals. Unwieldy stacks of paper rest perilously on chairs and cabinets. The phone rings off the hook, and students who are taking his classes on African-American politics and urban policy appear at his door to trade academic minutiae. Looking relaxed in jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers, he rejects the notion that his rhetorical style is alienating those who might serve as allies in coming battles. "I'm cutting off allies who don't mean anything," he says calmly. "They don't represent anything. They don't have a base. They don't mobilize anything."

Regarding Kelley's allegation, echoed by countless others, that he is motivated by jealousy, Reed responded in the *Voice*, "I don't understand of what exactly Kelley imagines me to be jealous. Is it the Super Friends' fame? If so, the charge is a confession."

A confession of what?

## REED HAS ATTEMPTED TO REMOVE THE BLACK INTELLECTUALS DEBATE FROM THE REALM OF THE GLOSSY MAGAZINE AND THE GLARE OF CHARLIE ROSE'S STUDIO.

"That this notion of public regard is in fact meaningful and something we should want to attain," Reed replies. "It is not something I have an interest in because I know the price. The price of that renown—if that's what it is—is that you must at least genuflect to the prevailing orthodoxies about race and inequality."

He pauses for a moment and shifts in his chair. Suddenly there is a sparkle in his eye. Becoming an academic

celebrity, he says, is "a pretty easy thing to do if you want to do it. But that's not my constituency. That's not my world."

**REED'S WORLD**, to a considerable extent, is the political and cultural milieu of the left, which may help to explain his fire-breathing manner. "I come from a tradition where polemics were strong because people cared about politics," he says. (The environment of his youth also played a role: "I went to high school in the inner city, and we played the dozens *all day long*.") Reed was born in 1947 in New York. His parents were in the orbit of the Communist Party, and he grew up in the shadow of Henry Wallace, the Rosenbergs, and Joe McCarthy. Adolph Reed Sr., a political scientist, taught at small colleges in the south, and was dismissed from at least one faculty position because of his civil rights activism.

Much of his childhood was spent in New Orleans, and in 1963 he was one of the first black students to attend Tulane University. He left after a year. Three decades later, when Reed was being aggressively courted to teach at Tulane, the mayor of New Orleans, who was an old family friend, tried unsuccessfully to lure him back to his hometown.

ADOLPH REED (RIGHT) AT THE LABOR PARTY'S FOUNDING CONVENTION IN JUNE 1996



He eventually wound up attending college at the University of North Carolina, where he threw himself into political work as state organizer for the youth section of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party. Disillusioned by the sectarianism he found there, he left campus in the fall of 1969 and joined the GI Coffeehouse movement, a support network for antiwar soldiers, at Fort Bragg. Reed helped organize the poor neighborhoods surrounding the base and worked with dissident servicemen. He continued as an organizer until 1972, when, sensing that the movement was drying up around him, he went back to school. Several years later, he received a Ph.D. in political science from Atlanta University. While writing his dissertation—titled “W.E.B. Du Bois: Liberal Collectivism and the Effort to Consolidate a Black Elite”—Reed held several jobs in Atlanta city government, including a position as a policy analyst for Mayor Maynard Jackson. In 1981 he was hired by Yale to teach political science and American studies. In 1988 he was promoted to full professor.

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**AFTER** a decade in New Haven, however, Reed was beginning to feel restless, and in 1991 he left Yale for Northwestern. For the most part, he was not politically active in the 1980s and arrived in Chicago with no commitment to grassroots politics. But a chance encounter in a restaurant with

a member of the Coalition for New Priorities (CNP), an umbrella network of more than one hundred community organizations, inspired him to participate. “He just said ‘use me,’ so we used him,” recalls Bernice Bild, the treasurer (and former executive director) of the CNP. Reed eventually became cochair, an unpaid position he holds today.

In Chicago, the CNP was at the forefront of organizing opposition to the Contract With America, and Reed played a key role in planning a demonstration that drew more than three thousand people, in June 1995. Later, when Newt Gingrich appeared at the American Booksellers Association convention in Chicago, Reed and a raucous band of demonstrators confronted him, and CNN was on hand to videotape it. Suzan Erem of the Service Employees International Union, Local 73, who put in sixty-hour weeks alongside Reed in the months leading up to the larger rally, recalled that she didn’t realize until much later that he was a professor. “I thought he was a full-time activist,” Erem says.

The range of his political activities,



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wisdom of love

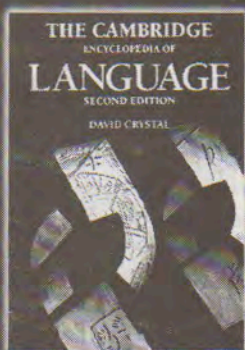
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on and off campus, is extensive. He recently advised Northwestern students about how to create a cross-campus progressive student alliance that might incorporate both community and elite colleges, and he assisted activist Alice Palmer in her unsuccessful race against Jesse Jackson Jr. for a congressional seat on Chicago's south side. These days, however, most of Reed's energy is dedicated to the Labor Party, an ambitious, and perhaps quixotic, attempt to give trade union workers an independent voice in the political arena. In a recent *Voice* column, he insisted that organized labor holds the key to the left's resuscitation: "For all the limitations of the labor movement and of the individuals who comprise it, there's no place else where the left's political concerns gain a hearing and have a constituency outside the coffee shops, cultural studies programs, and sectarian hutches."

Reed is occasionally forced to choose between his academic and political commitments. In June 1995, with the CNP rally looming, he sought the endorsement of a local immigrants' rights group whose presence, he hoped, would boost the overall turnout. He was told to present himself at one of their meetings and to wait patiently until the end, when the subject of endorsements would be raised. The meeting happened to conflict with a conference sponsored by the American Philosophical Association, where Reed was scheduled to participate in a panel discussion on race and IQ. He obtained the endorsement—after waiting five hours—and never made it to the discussion at the Palmer House Hilton.

**GIVEN MANY** of Reed's beliefs, the target of his first book was, in the context of American politics in the mid-1980s, a rather obvious one. In *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, he argued that Jackson's 1984 campaign was grounded in an antidemocratic political style; that it was bereft of a concrete program for political and economic advancement; that it offered little more than expressive catharsis and tent-revival imagery; and that it pandered to white leftists. Situating Jackson within the larger milieu of

post-civil rights African-American politics, Reed asserted that his defeat reflected the "general failure of black political elites to formulate programmatic agendas that are meaningful to their claimed constituents." Discomforted by the attacks on blacks who publicly criticized Jackson, Reed concluded with a call for a new "civic liberalism" in African-American politics: "Dissent must be dissociated from the stigma of race treason," he wrote.

ACCORDING TO REED, DU BOIS'S FAITH IN SCIENCE, REASON, AND THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERTS MADE HIM A MUCH MORE CONSERVATIVE THINKER THAN IS USUALLY ASSUMED.

C. Vann Woodward in *The New Republic* and David Garrow in *Dissent* applauded Reed's efforts. Others were less approving. In *The Washington Post Book World*, Kenneth Clark wrote that "nowhere does Adolph Reed give evidence that he understands, or is capable of coping with, the complexity of Jackson as personality, civil rights leader, or political candidate." Shirley Washington, writing in *The Black Scholar*, reminded Reed that "the enemy is the racist society, not Jackson." Some readers took Reed for a conservative. A fan letter from Clarence Thomas expressed relief that finally a black person had the courage to expose Jackson's shortcomings.

After the publication of the Jackson book, and before he took on the black intelligentsia, much of Reed's energy was devoted to questioning popular stereotypes about the so-called under-



W.E.B. DU BOIS

class. In a 1991 article in *Radical America*, Reed noted how the Reagan years spawned a discourse that highlighted the “defective nature of poor people’s motivations, moral character and behavior.”

According to Reed, this essentially Victorian view, embraced by liberals as well as conservatives, carries with it the burden of moral regeneration, behavior modification, and “special tutelage by black betters.” Implicit in this discourse, Reed observed in a much discussed review of Shelby Steele’s *The Content of Our Character*, is an assumption that “black Americans must straighten themselves out instead of making demands on the state for equity as citizens.” He believes that public debates concerning poverty should focus on the structural and political forces that account for inequality, not on the lifestyles of inner-city residents.

The *Radical America* essay strove to counteract the lurid media accounts

of “slothful, baby-factory mothers” and the double standards inherent therein:

How exactly does out-of-wedlock birth become an instance of social pathology? If a thirty-five-year-old lawyer decides to have a baby without seal of approval from church or state or enduring male affiliation, we quite rightly do not consider her to be acting pathologically; we may even properly laud her independence and refusal to knuckle under to patriarchal conventions. Why does such a birth become pathological when it occurs in the maternity ward in Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx, say, rather than within the pastel walls of an alternative birthing center? If the one woman’s decision expresses pathology because she makes it in poverty, then we have fallen into a nonsensical tautology: she is poor because she is pathological and pathological because she is poor.

Though Reed was hardly alone in making this case, his attack on the “blame

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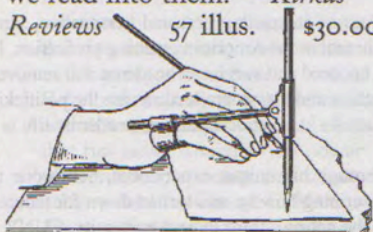
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the victims" mentality was an especially far-ranging one. In fact, many of his harshest words were aimed at a scholar who agrees with his emphasis on the structural causes of poverty: William Julius Wilson. Writing in *The Nation* in 1988, Reed praised Wilson's book *The Truly Disadvantaged* as a considerable improvement over existing scholarship and echoed Wilson's call for an omnibus program of jobs and job training. But he took strong issue with Wilson's language—terms such as "aberration," "deviance," and "pathology"—which imply "a mode of social health from which the 'underclass' diverges. What is that model?" he asked. In regard to Wilson's focus on female-headed households, and his plan to create jobs to increase the number of "marriageable" men, Reed detected a "reflexive anti-feminism," grounded in a "Reaganite frame of reference," that led Wilson to adopt "the language of moral repressiveness and patriarchy." According to Reed, Wilson has played a unique role in legitimating underclass rhetoric, and his race has helped him

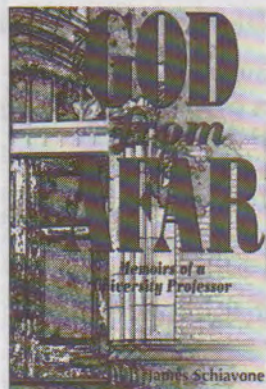
do it: "His endorsement insulates the [underclass] ideology from charges of racism."

Wilson himself has little patience for Reed, or his views. "I have many critics whom I respond to because their criticisms are thoughtful and serious," Wilson says. "Reed's criticisms are not thoughtful and serious. He shoots from the hip and has little regard for the accuracy of some of his assertions. His attacks are driven more by ideology than by empirical facts." He adds: "Reed is a very smart man who could make a real contribution to social science. He's not doing it."

Other scholars have been no friendlier to Reed's writings on the underclass. Critics have argued (in letters to *The Nation*) that by elevating the structural interpretation he has ignored the behavioral realm altogether. Indeed, there may be a significant irony here: While Reed criticizes black intellectuals without hesitation, and holds them to the highest standards of personal integrity, he seems to feel that liberal discussion of destructive inner-city behavior,

however well-intentioned, should be avoided, because it inevitably helps the right. In this context, Martin Kilson of Harvard asserted that Reed was "ostrich-like toward the myriad crises among poor blacks." Underclass theorists, wrote Mark Naison of Fordham University, "are not imagining deteriorating conditions in inner-city neighborhoods." And Robert J.S. Ross of Clark University suggested that Reed was playing fast and loose with statistics about family structure and poverty. Not one to shrink from a polemic, Reed unleashed a torrent of facts and invective against his critics.

**WHEN** some of this smoke clears, Reed's academic reputation is likely to depend less on his work on urban poverty than on his book *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line*, which Oxford University Press will publish this summer. Reed considers himself a diligent scholar, and, with its vast bibliography and scholastic tone, the Du Bois book is very much a political



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science monograph. In contrast to the wide-ranging work of David Levering Lewis and Arnold Rampersad, Reed's book examines the philosophical and historical underpinnings of Du Bois's "elite-driven organizational model" for the black population, a model that Reed says Du Bois never really abandoned, even in his later years. Reed's larger point is that the core principles of Du Bois's political thought—faith in science, reason, and the authority of experts—make him a much more conservative and traditional thinker than is usually assumed, especially given his later embrace of communism and pan-Africanism.

The concluding chapters offer a wry take on the famous concept of "double consciousness," which Du Bois introduced in *The Souls of Black Folk*. "One ever feels his two-ness," Du Bois wrote. "An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings." In recent years, countless scholars have employed the concept as a metaphorical characterization of the black American condition. Reed's objection to all this is twofold. First,

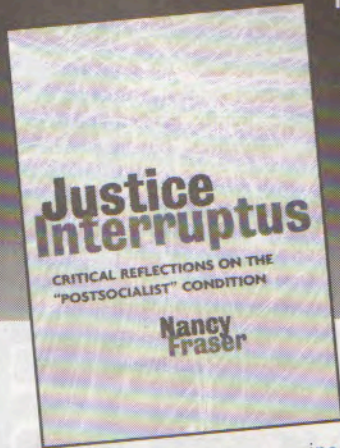
IN RESPONSE TO  
 REED, HENRY LOUIS  
 GATES SAYS, "IF WE  
 HAVE TO WAIT  
 UNTIL IDEOLOGICAL  
 PURITY IS ACHIEVED,  
 WE'LL BE WAITING  
 FOR GODOT. I DON'T  
 KNOW ABOUT YOU,  
 BUT I AIN'T GOT  
 THE TIME."

he argues, the double consciousness notion was never an organizing principle of Du Bois's political thought; indeed, it virtually disappeared from his

writings after 1903. Second, Reed contends, the implication that millions of people experience a bifurcated identity simply by virtue of their racial status is a plainly essentialist notion that covers up complexity and diversity within the black community. Citing a passage from Gates's memoir, *Colored People* ("Bach and James Brown. Sushi and Fried Catfish"), he suggests that the ideology of double consciousness is solidly anchored in the upper echelons of the black social hierarchy. After all, it's the black elite that lives in close proximity to whites and has the most occasion to brood over its "two souls."

The book concludes with a critical assessment of the literary turn in African-American studies, and in particular of the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. According to Reed, Gates is all too typical of black leadership today. Though Gates questions the notion of black authenticity, his strained efforts to connect African-American culture with African tradition in his book *The Signifying Monkey* suggest that he is, in fact, very attached to that notion. Moreover, by treating African-American

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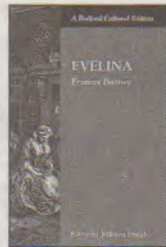
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culture as first and foremost a matter of literary canons and texts, Gates elevates the writer to the dubious role of "point of consciousness" for the race and puts literary form ahead of political agency. The overall result of this approach, Reed says, is a depoliticized brand of scholarship that diverts attention away from concrete political actions, while still taking advantage of a vague aura of political commitment.

Gates welcomes the dialogue, but with certain reservations. "Adolph has played, and will continue to play, an important part within the Afro-American intellectual community," he says. "The problem with his recent writing is his tendency to make ad hominem attacks, to demonize, to lose what I think is his objectivity on occasion—especially when he writes about my friend and colleague Cornel West." In Gates's view, Reed's mode of critical exchange ("I think it's amusing in a barber shop, not in the pages of *The Village Voice*") inhibits a unified assault on the entrenched difficulties of race and class. "If we have to wait until ideological purity is achieved," Gates says, "we'll be waiting for Godot. I don't know about you, but I ain't got the time."

## GATES HAS A point:

Reed's standards of ideological purity strike many people as overbearing, and, in any case, they are impossible to apply to contemporary American life. But those standards are also responsible for what is most refreshing about his work: his independence. Whether he is excoriating "confused and depressingly ignorant" rappers such as Public Enemy and Sister Souljah, scoring the Million Man March as "the first protest in history in which people gathered to protest themselves," or talking about "Jim Crow standards" on the left, he is beholden to no one. In a 1993 piece for *The Progressive*, which contained echoes of Ralph Ellison's famous riposte to Irving Howe in *The New Leader* in 1964, Reed opined that whites on the left don't want to confront complexity in black politics: "In general, they simply do not see political differences among black people." On many other occasions, he has not hesitated to demolish sacred

notions. In the summer of 1995, when many activists leaped to the defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther sentenced to death for killing a Philadelphia police officer, Reed suggested, also in *The Progressive*, that the available evidence leaves open the possibility that he could actually be guilty of the crime for which he was charged, and he cautioned Abu-Jamal's supporters to "avoid the temptation to exalt him as a symbol of progressive politics."

The suspicion of heroes, leaders, and martyrs is a thematic thread that runs through Reed's work and his life. At the end of our final discussion, which touched on Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Harold Cruse, and others, I asked him who the figures were that he most admired. He remarked a bit impatiently that he doesn't have heroes and that a healthy skepticism toward them is necessary. The hostility he feels toward the new black intellectuals is, to a great extent, rooted in his belief that the last thing the country needs is another crop of celebrities. In a 1992 essay on Malcolm X, Reed wrote that Malcolmism supports the "continued evasion of tough political questions" and that Malcolm has consequently become little more than "a frozen icon to be revered, a reification of other people's memories":

The best way to think...of Malcolm is that he was just like the rest of us—a regular person saddled with imperfect knowledge, human frailties, and conflicting imperatives, but nonetheless trying to make sense of his very specific history, trying unsuccessfully to transcend it, and struggling to push it in a humane direction.... To the extent that we believe otherwise, we turn Malcolm into a postage stamp and reproduce the evasive reflex that has deformed critical black political action for a generation.

Reed's final estimation of Malcolm is one that could apply just as well to any of the numerous individuals who have been the target of his criticism. "He was no prince," he wrote. "There are no princes."

Scott Sherman is a writer who lives in New York. His work has appeared in *Newsday*, *In These Times*, *The Boston Review*, and other publications.