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On the “New Jim Crow”: An Interview With Adolph Reed

by Doug Henwood on March 22, 2013



*The following is an excerpt from the March 7 episode of Doug Henwood’s **Behind the News** radio show, embedded below. Henwood interviewed **Adolph Reed**, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, about his **critique** of recent films about race, including *The Help*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, and *Django Unchained*. During the interview, Henwood and Reed had the following exchange, on the concept of “the New Jim Crow” popularized by Michelle Alexander’s award-winning **book** of the same name. Transcribed and lightly edited by The North Star, with kind permission from Henwood and Reed.*

Doug Henwood: The phrase “the new Jim Crow” is making the rounds a lot. What’s wrong with drawing that parallel?

Adolph Reed: A number of things. First, not to be pedantically historicist about this, but it’s not. Jim Crow was a regime that was brought into existence after the defeat of the populist insurgency at the end of the 19th century as a set of mechanisms for consolidating class power in the South, in particular that of the planter-merchant class. And it was a set of institutions, both those of petty apartheid and the grand apartheid of denying citizenship rights to black Americans, that were rooted to that political-economic moment and the regime of class power that was anchored in plantation elites. One of the reasons the Jim Crow system was vulnerable to attack after World War II in a way it hadn’t been previously—because black people never liked it and tried to stop it as much as possible—was that it had lost a good bit of its economic foundations. So the structure of petty apartheid wasn’t as essential anymore to maintain class and racial hierarchies.

So, that’s a problem. I would argue that this is not just a problem of historicist pedantry, because the tendency to disconnect the social practices analytically from the institutional arrangements in which those practices were embedded really kind of cuts the historicity of the past and the present out of the picture. And besides, it can’t be just like Jim Crow. I remember I was at a conference a number of years ago at Harvard Law School when **Derrick Bell** was still on the faculty there. Bell was on a panel at this conference, and he insisted that nothing really had changed for black Americans since 1865. And I’m looking at this—here he was, a full professor at Harvard Law School, making the assertion that nothing had changed. Well, obviously something had changed, because he was in Harvard Law School without a broom in his hand.

The argument by analogy simply doesn’t work. And of course the poster version of this argument now, Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*, kind of makes this point for me, because she dangles the analogy throughout the first two thirds of the book, and finally she says, Well, it doesn’t really work, because this isn’t really Jim Crow, and there are a lot of ways that it’s different. At best, it’s a nice-sounding slogan, but it’s not one that helps us understand anything. And the stronger version of my argument would be that it does just the opposite.

D.H.: Of course, there are vast differences in experiences of the criminal justice system, from stop-and-frisk in the streets of New York to residents of death row in Texas. That, people say, is Jim Crow-ish. What do you say?

A.R.: Well, I don't know what it gains for us to call it Jim Crow-ish. It might be better to make sense of it on its own terms, that is, in relation to the drug war, to policing, urban decline, and the changing logic of metropolitan redevelopment in cities over the last two or three decades, which have produced this vast new lumpenproletariat or marginal working class—I'm going to try to avoid the neologisms like *precariat*—that's available for casual labor and fodder for the criminal-justice industry and for the therapy industry. I think it would make sense to discuss those phenomena, or in fact the general phenomenon that would encompass all those taxa, on their own terms, without the analogy to Jim Crow. Among other reasons, what's the agency? The New Jim Crow argument, it seems to me, posits racism as an ontological force that imposes itself trans-contextually on historical circumstances. Therefore, ironically, the argument separates racism from its embeddedness in the structures and dynamics that reproduce American capitalism on a regular basis—like, for instance, presumptions of racial hierarchy that are built into assessments of skill in the labor market and into residential real estate value quite explicitly.

That would be a conversation to have that would point in some policy directions, but I don't see what good ontologizing racism, as the analogy does, does for us, except for those people who are committed to a view that racism is America's original sin or the national disease or a pathology that will undercut any progressive movement, and so on. To my taste, that's just way too close to the Nation of Islam's **Yakub theory**.

D.H.: Funny to find myself quoting Milton Friedman at a moment like this, but he did say once in a debate with George Shultz over fiscal policy that when you start resorting to metaphors, you're admitting that your argument is weak.

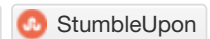
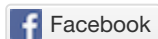
A.R.: [Laughs.] Yeah, well, God forbid I should also find myself endorsing anything Milton Friedman said, even at the level of the sun shining outside. But that sounds pretty good to me.

D.H.: You said *The Help* located Jim Crow in attitudes and personal relations rather than in law, very explicit, racialized law. So this New Jim Crow is what, attitudes?

A.R.: I guess so. This is where the metaphor climbs the scale of mysticism, because what you get are attempts to square the circle between references to structural forces and disembodied ideology. So this is where the "takes on a life of its own" thing becomes not a metaphor but in effect a substantive claim, or a metaphor that's treated like a substantive claim. You get convoluted discussions of structural racism, systemic racism, institutional racism, all of which feel instructively like Thomas S. Kuhn's description in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* about what happens when interpretive paradigms are in crisis, and it springs leaks all over the place. and the adherents have to keep patching. You spend more time patching up ad hoc explanations of anomalies that should be explained by the paradigm but aren't, which are the ultimate indication that the paradigm is experiencing a crisis of its own interpretative authority. And I think that's where we are with anti-racism at this point. Look, there are only two possibilities. Either there's an idea that drives the movement of the structural forces and gives them teleological direction—let's just call it God—or there's not. And I think a lot of the argument that underlies the appeal either to Jim Crow, or to slavery for that matter, rests on an attempt to have that question both ways or to split the difference. And you can't. It's a difference that can't be split.



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The argument is not that racism is America's original, and transhistorical sin. The argument is that racism is revitalized in efforts to renew conservatism—over 100 years ago, against populism, and again at the end of the sixties.