
Review

Black Rights/White Wrongs: The critique of racial liberalism

Charles W. Mills

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At the last American Political Science Association annual meeting I attended, Charles Mills was on the lips of nearly everyone I saw speak. This is as it should be. His work on racial liberalism is key not only to understanding this political moment – a moment in which white nationalism has become more visible, virulent, and accepted – but also to opening eyes to the continuity of white supremacy in the United States. His critical engagements with ideal theory and the white episteme help us understand why whites' eyes in particular have been closed to the centrality of racial domination in US democracy, liberal theory and practice, and modernity itself. And his positive assessment of the possibilities of liberalism stands as an encouraging counterpoint to the views of racial pessimists and skeptics, while his ideas about reconstructing liberal theory in the direction of a black radical liberalism point a way forward.

Black Rights/White Wrongs brings various threads of Mills' past arguments together, updating when appropriate and elaborating on them as necessary. At the heart of the book is the following claim: while there is now broad recognition of the poisonous effect of classism and sexism on liberal practice and theory, academics and the public continue to lag when it comes to seeing how racism has deeply infected liberalism. Why? White ignorance (see Ch. 4) – a powerful cognitive tendency to perceive and interpret the world in ways that filter out evidence of racial domination – perpetuates romantic ideas about liberal societies and theory. Such ignorance feeds and is fed by a variety of social dynamics and intellectual currents. Mills, particularly concerned with philosophy, highlights the mystification of central figures in the liberal tradition (like Kant – see Ch. 6) and the occlusion of racial domination by the privileging of certain philosophical approaches and methods (see his criticism of Rawls in Ch. 5 and Part 2).

In both practice and theory, liberalism has been as deeply shaped by racism as it has been shaped by patriarchal capitalism. What we have in contemporary U.S. society, Mills argues, is 'racial liberalism': a regime that only recognizes the moral equality of, and thus only benefits, whites (see Chs. 1–3). This reality requires a



political philosophy that abstracts without idealizing – that starts from and attends directly to the very unideal conditions of real societies. Mills identifies abstractions like white supremacy and racial exploitation as being particularly promising resources (see Ch. 7) for the construction of non-ideal theory – the only kind of theory that can truly help realize ideals like justice and equity in the world (see Ch. 5).

Though deeply critical of contemporary liberalism, Mills argues that liberalism can be redeemed and that there is good reason to invest in it (see Ch. 2 and epilogue). It can take many forms, and it is only through a mix of historical contingency and group interest that an oppressive version has become the dominant one. Re-envisioning liberalism is not only possible but strategically savvy, given its contemporary and worldwide purchase. It is a particularly promising resource when it comes to the struggle for racial equity, Mills claims, because racial exploitation, unlike class exploitation, hinges on differential status – a wrong easily identified from a liberal viewpoint (p. 124).

Gathered together, Mills' arguments about 'actually existing' liberalism and mainstream liberal theory constitute a deep, clear, strongly supported, and well-defended (not to mention witty!) critique of the dominant political paradigm and mainstream political philosophy. His deconstruction of white ignorance and his reflections on methodology are invaluable resources to those who are compelled to take up his call for re-founding both liberalism and political philosophy. I cannot emphasize enough how important this work is, or how well done. But I nonetheless want to raise a few questions and criticisms.

First, while Mills argues with scholars who champion intersectional analysis that 'a focus on race should not exclude a concern with gender and class privilege' (p. xvix) and he invokes feminist and Marxist arguments about the ways women and the lower classes have been subordinated under liberalism throughout the book, this book centers race. Mills justifies this by saying that race needs emphasis at this moment because the racial critique of liberalism is less advanced. But this begs the question – even if the feminist and working-class critiques of liberalism are more advanced as Mills suggests, does this mean that there needs to or should be exclusive focus on the racial critique to achieve parity? Mills' focus on race, and the ways in which he brings in class and gender, implies that identity categories are additive in a way that most scholars committed to intersectionality would contest. I do not know how much an equal emphasis on race, gender, and class – achieved by, for instance, centering the multiply marginalized in his non-ideal theory – would change the content of his arguments; but his approach raises a pressing question about what a commitment to intersectionality requires in terms of the practice of theory in the contemporary intellectual context.

Second, there is a significant tension running through the book. Mills spends the first part of the book emphatically arguing that (always culturally mediated) conceptions of personhood have mattered tremendously for the direction of liberal



theory and societies. He later points out that ‘insofar as rectification [for racial injustice] targets and seeks to correct (“repair”) a wrong, it is not achieved merely, say, by giving the black population money. The question is the under what auspices and what characterization this transfer occurs’ (p. 172). In other words, the meaning attributed to this transfer matters. Mills then goes on to admit the importance of symbolic measures (p. 172) in addition to reparative redistribution. But after all of this insistence on the significance of culture, when we get to the chapter on racial exploitation (Ch. 7), he indicates that ‘[although] much of the 1990s’ and later literatures on “whiteness” focuses on the discursive, the cultural, and the personal testimonial...*it is arguably the material payoff from whiteness, the political economy of race, that is crucial*, and the discussion needs to be brought back to these fundamentals’ (p. 120, emphasis added).

This devaluation of culture extends into his analysis of periods of racial exploitation in the chapter. He argues that, in the contemporary period, what really matters in the perpetuation of white supremacy is the material legacy of the earlier period in which non-whites were formally disadvantaged. Though perceptions of inferiority may ‘tacitly underwrite’ differential treatment, they are ‘no longer essential to’ it (p. 125). We also see the primacy given to the economic in his argument that the material interests of whites as a group are the primary obstacle to the realization of racial justice (p. 132).

This ranking of the economic over and above culture in importance is deeply problematic. The economic is thoroughly culturally mediated; you cannot separate ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ out in a way that allows one to say one is a more important determinant of white supremacy. There is a lot of immaterial and material culture working together to convince whites that they deserve more than non-whites, that it is rational, reasonable, and fair to either actively discriminate or passively enable structural inequality. While attachment to the material benefits of whiteness is no doubt part of the problem, I don’t see how Mills can be so certain that the culture of racial inequity is *not* playing an integral role in reproducing the interactions, processes and policies that maintain the political economic status quo. Mills’ call to get back to ‘fundamentals’ is thus not only at odds with some of his own best insights on the importance of culture; I worry that it also paints a misleading picture of the obstacles to racial justice.

Regardless of these concerns, this is essential reading for a long list of groups. Clearly, it is a must-read for those who work on race in political theory/philosophy and those who work on liberalism. But it should also be read by radicals, who should engage Mills’ provocations in the ‘Occupy Liberalism!’ (Ch. 2) and ‘Black Radical Liberalism’ (epilogue) chapters. And it should be read by those learning how to do political theory/philosophy. Beyond the compelling arguments about ideal and non-ideal theory and the useful distinctions he draws to differentiate between various kinds of work in theory, there are also helpful reflections on how



we identify an author's 'real' position, how we define a 'tradition,' and what it means to do an accurate history of Western philosophy (especially Ch. 6).

Finally, this is an essential reading for those concerned with the demographic composition of political science and philosophy as well as those wondering why this should be considered a concern. In several places (particularly Ch. 10), Mills reflects on the whiteness of political philosophy – a whiteness in substance that reflects in part the descriptive whiteness of the agenda-setters. I started this review by saying that everyone was talking about Mills at APSA, but my experience as a political theorist who works on race and democracy is a particular one. The forthcoming publication of a major volume on African American political thought by the University of Chicago Press (edited by Melvin Rogers and Jack Turner) as well as the choice of Lawrie Balfour as the editor of *Political Theory* speaks to the growing legitimacy conferred on works that and authors who center race. But the question remains as to whether this work will remain 'conceptually tokenized' (p. 188) – whether it affects the conceptual apparatus, descriptive frameworks, methodologies, and value interpretations of all authors who understand themselves as working on 'justice.' This book provides a snapshot of a moment in time, and a measure by which we can mark academic progress in the future. To what extent do philosophy, political theory, and political science acknowledge the centrality of racism to US democracy/liberalism/modernity? To what extent do people in these disciplines and fields take on the task of confronting it headfirst rather than evading actually existing oppressions in the pursuit of a purer theory? Only time will tell, but the call to action is clarion and, in this author's mind, righteous and compelling.

Greta Fowler Snyder
Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington 6012, New Zealand
greta.snyder@vuw.ac.nz