



CHARLES W. MILLS

BLACK RIGHTS / WHITE WRONGS

The Critique of Racial Liberalism



Black Rights/White Wrongs

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Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism

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White Wrongs*

The Critique of Racial Liberalism

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Toward a deracialized liberalism

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice.

—Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail"

A white moderate . . . is a cat who wants to lynch you from a *low* tree.

—Dick Gregory

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INTRODUCTION

If any political ideology is centrally—perhaps almost definitionally—associated with modernity, it is liberalism. In all of its iterations—from its original contractarian formulation through its later utilitarian variants to its revised post-Rawlsian contractarian rebirth—liberalism was and is supposed to be emancipatory. Liberalism was the incarnation of the rationalism and egalitarianism of the emerging bright new world that was going to sweep away the darkness and irrational social hierarchies of the ancien régime. But as the Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo has argued in his recently translated *Liberalism: A Counter-History*,¹ liberalism's actual record is far more checkered. Not merely has it been complicit with continuing discriminatory practices of the past (as with gender) but it has been vigorously active in installing nouveaux régimes of imperial racial rule with a body count far greater than the anciens régimes of class.

Thus Losurdo urges a revisionist historiography that would forsake uncritical adulation for an objective recounting of the documented history. If you add together what he calls the various “exclusion clauses” of liberalism's most celebrated manifestos, treatises, and declarations of human rights, you get a litany of oppressions rather than a list of emancipations. Even on paper, the white male working class does not get some of the rights we associate with modernity until the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, and in the case of white women and people of color, the wait has been even longer (and in some cases continues still). It is only possible to present this narrative as a triumphalist one because of the systematic erasure of these histories, and the tight focus on a small subset of the “political” population (the polis proper, so to speak): propertied white males. The most famous documents of liberal modernity are primarily about this group's liberation, not anybody else's.

So how should this story really be told? The route taken by most philosophers purifies and Platonizes liberalism into an ideal Form of itself, and then—ignoring the exclusions that in fact deprive the majority of the population of entitlement to equal liberal status—produces a conceptual

history in this elevated realm that never touches down to the hard ground of reality. Liberalism as it should have been is represented as liberalism as it actually was. This is not merely bad intellectual history but is also a poor strategy for realizing the promise of liberalism. The real-life political struggles that were historically necessary to overcome liberalism's particularisms are erased by a myth of implicit potential inclusion. Better, in my opinion, to recognize these exclusions as theoretically central, admit their shaping of liberalism's array of rights and freedoms, and then confront the critics' case for discrediting liberalism altogether with the defense's arguments for how it can nonetheless be reclaimed and redeemed.

Orthodox Marxism, varieties of radical feminism and black nationalism, dominant strains of post-structuralist and post-colonial theory, exemplify the path of a principled rejection of liberalism. Essentially irredeemable in the eyes of these opponents, liberalism is to be transcended by a higher communal, post-bourgeois, sororal and decolonial social order, even if the details are too often more gestured at than worked out. By contrast, social democracy and feminist liberalism argue for a radical rethinking of liberalism that—recognizing its deficiencies—still seeks to reclaim it as a liberatory political philosophy. Rejecting mainstream liberalism's classically individualistic social ontology for an ontology of class and gender, challenging its cramped schedule of rights for a normative empowerment of the class- and gender-subordinated, these political projects affirm a more expansive vision that would take us beyond bourgeois liberalism (not a pleonasm, for this analysis) and patriarchal liberalism. Liberalism's historic complicity with ruling class and male power does not, they contend, preclude retrieving it.²

Class theory and feminism are well established in the disciplines of political theory and political philosophy. But the recognition and critical theorization of what I am here calling—by analogy with bourgeois and patriarchal liberalism—*racial liberalism* is much more undeveloped in these circles.³ This collection of essays is my attempt to assemble work that brings out, from various angles, some of the key features of racial liberalism, thus expanding the parameters of the debate. Part I comprises my critiques of different dimensions of racial liberalism, Part II my critiques of Rawls, Rawlsianism, and “white” liberal political philosophy for their non-existent or at best problematic attempts to deal with race and justice. So my hope is that the framework will constitute a useful contribution to debates about liberalism in general and the theorization of race in ethics, political philosophy, and political theory in particular.

But first I must address a possible objection. One might argue that—however useful the concept—the term that I have chosen is unhelpfully ambiguous, since in the 1950s, for example, to be a racial liberal in the United

States meant being someone who opposed segregation and endorsed black civil rights. Why not just say directly and unequivocally: “racist liberalism”? The reason is that I want a phrase broad enough to encompass both overtly racist liberalism, where people of color are explicitly conceptualized as racial inferiors, and the no longer overtly racist, “color-blind” liberalism of today. In the latter variety of liberalism, illicit white racial advantage is still being secured, but now primarily through the evasions in the theory’s key assumptions rather than the derogation of nonwhites. (Compare the second-wave feminist argument that the arbitrary public sphere/private sphere distinction continues to reproduce gender hierarchy, even in a putatively post-sexist period in which men and women are now supposedly treated as equals.)⁴ Since most contemporary white liberals would disavow any explicitly racist sentiments, it is important to convey to them that the liberalism they are endorsing is still racialized, even if it ostensibly repudiates any racist representations of people of color.

For me, then, racial liberalism (analogous to patriarchal liberalism) is a liberalism in which key terms have been written by race and the discursive logic shaped accordingly. This position expresses my commitment to what has been called the “symbiotic” view of racism, which sees race as historically penetrating *into* liberalism’s descriptive and normative apparatus so as to produce a more-or-less consistent racialized ideology, albeit one that evolves over time, rather than seeing race as being externally and “anomalously” related to it.⁵ Unlike my post-structuralist and post-colonial colleagues, however, I see this penetration as contingent, not a matter of a pre-ordained logic of liberalism itself, but a consequence of the mandates for European liberal theorists of establishing and maintaining imperial and colonial rule abroad, and nonwhite racial subordination at home.⁶ Hence the hope of redeeming liberalism by self-consciously taking this history into account: recognizing the historic racialization of liberalism *so as better to deracialize it*—thereby producing a color-conscious, racially reflexive, anti-racist liberalism on the alert for its own inherited racial distortions.⁷ Abstract Platonized liberalism erases actual liberalism’s racist history, a blinding white Form that, in pretending a colorlessness that it did not and does not achieve, obfuscates more than it illuminates. The problem is not abstraction as such but a problematic mode of idealizing abstraction that abstracts away from social oppression, and in that way both conceals its extent and inhibits the development of the conceptual tools necessary for understanding and dealing with its workings.⁸ Identifying the historically hegemonic varieties of liberalism *as* racialized and white alerts us to the erasure, the whiting-out, of the past of racial subordination that current, seemingly genuinely inclusive varieties of liberalism now seek to disown.

As the title of this book signifies, then, it is an enterprise based on the inversion of the standard metaphors in which white is right and black is wrong. It urges us to recognize how the historically exclusionary rights of white liberalism (a.k.a. “liberalism”), based on the suppression of equal black rights, have left a legacy of white wrongs. These wrongs have thus been not merely material but also normative and conceptual, wrongs within the apparatus of liberalism itself—as summarized by the two famous judgments about white “moderates” (in context roughly equivalent to “liberals”) made by Martin Luther King Jr. and Dick Gregory that I have used as my epigraphs. Hence the need for their black righting.

Part I of the book covers the overarching themes of epistemology, personhood, and property, all central to the liberal project, and all, in my opinion, distortionally shaped by race. Liberal enlightenment presumes an objective perception of things as they are and as they should be, factually and morally, for political communities characterized by reciprocally respecting relations among equally recognized persons in agreement on the fair terms for the appropriation of the world. But racial domination interferes with objective cognition, denies equal racial personhood, and generates rationalizations of unjust white acquisition. Thus they are all negatively transformed by the dynamic of racial liberalism.

The opening chapter sets the stage with a 2012 interview I did with Tom Mills (no relation, so far as I know) of the British New Left Project. For the benefit of a transatlantic audience less familiar with critical race theory, I explain the rationale for retaining “race” as a crucial category, suitably transformed, and what I see as its historic link with imperial domination and its relation to the conceptually distinct, if empirically overlapping, systems of gender and class. Racial liberalism is introduced as homologous with the far more familiar “patriarchal liberalism” identified by feminist theory.

Chapter 2, “Occupy Liberalism!,” locates the project within the broader context of the need to transform liberalism for a progressive political agenda. Invoking the slogan of the (then) recent “Occupy!” movement, I argue—against radical orthodoxy—that liberalism has an under-appreciated radical potential that is masked by the long complicity of its hegemonic varieties with plutocratic, patriarchal, and white-supremacist structures of power. But this complicity, I argue, is a function of dominant group interests and the successful political projects of the privileged, not the consequence of any ineluctable immanent conceptual dynamic of liberalism as a political ideology. Once we pluralize liberalism into *liberalisms* (both actual and hypothetical), we should be able to see how many claims about liberalism’s putatively problematic ontology and alleged incapacity to recognize and/or theorize social oppression really depend on the contingent features

of its historically dominant (but not inevitable) incarnations. An emancipatory liberalism can, I contend, be reconstructed that is not theoretically constrained in these unfortunate ways.

With this background established, I go on in chapter 3, “Racial Liberalism,” to make a detailed case for the usefulness of the construct. I point out the global hegemony of liberalism in a post–Cold War world and the triumph in the academy over the last few decades of Rawlsian contractarian liberalism in particular. But in the wide range of political responses to the work of John Rawls, the historic racialization of the contract apparatus and of the dominant varieties of liberalism will rarely be a topic of inquiry. Yet insofar as racism (ostensibly) violates the moral norms of modern political theory in general, liberal theorists across the spectrum, however much they disagree on other issues, should be able to converge on the necessity for purging contemporary liberal theory of its racist ancestry. Contra the exponents of color-blindness, however, I argue that this project can only be accomplished through a color-conscious investigative genealogy and reconstruction. Thus I urge a self-conscious deracializing of liberalism that would begin by recognizing the centrality of a social ontology of race to the modern world and the acknowledgment of a corresponding history of racial exploitation that needs to be registered in liberal categories and addressed as a matter of liberal social justice.

Oppositional bodies of political thought are often preoccupied with epistemological questions, in part for the simple reason that they are trying to explain how a dominant but misleading body of ideas (classist, sexist, racist) continues to perpetuate itself. One wants to understand both how the privileged can continue to deny the unfairness of their privilege and how (perhaps) one was oneself originally taken in by these ideas. I suggest that this pattern of denial and misapprehension can in the case of race be thought of as a “white ignorance,” an elaboration of the concept I introduced in *The Racial Contract* of an “epistemology of ignorance.”⁹ Chapter 4, “White Ignorance,” locates white miscognition as a structural phenomenon rather than a matter of individual white myopias. It is the result (not unavoidably, but as a strong psychological tendency) of racial location. Because of racial privilege, an inherited racialized set of concepts and beliefs, differential racial experience, and racial group interest, whites tend to get certain kinds of things wrong. As such, the chapter can be seen as a contribution from critical philosophy of race to the new “social” epistemology that has emerged in recent decades, a welcome turn away from the solipsistic Cartesian meditations that have typically characterized modern epistemology.

Chapter 5, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” takes a critical look at what could be called the epistemology of normative theory, specifically the normative

apparatus of “ideal theory” liberalism. Like chapter 2, it also adopts a broader perspective, reminding us that a focus on race should not exclude a concern with gender and class privilege also, all of which are indeed always in the modern world in intersection and interaction with one another. First written as a contribution to a feminist collection on moral psychology, it was then reprinted in a special symposium of the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, stimulating widespread discussion. The chapter expressed a frustration I and many others at the time (as it turned out) had begun to feel with “ideal theory” in ethics and political philosophy, most notably, of course, though not exclusively, in the work of Rawls. “Ideal theory” is not just normative theory, which by definition is a prerequisite for ethics and political philosophy, but the normative theory of a perfectly just society. The rationale was that developing such a perspective was crucial to doing non-ideal justice theory properly later on. But to many of us at the time it became increasingly questionable whether this “later on” was ever going to arrive, and that in reality ideal theory—whatever its original motivation—was functioning as a way of avoiding the hard facts of class, gender, and racial oppression; how they shape the human agents enmeshed in these relations of domination; and what our normative priorities should be. So the essay was an early effort in what has since become a growing wave of criticism of ideal theory, and I would like to think that it made at least a small contribution to getting things going.

No Western Enlightenment philosopher can equal the standing of Immanuel Kant, the luminary par excellence of eighteenth-century thought, with stellar accomplishments not merely in ethics and political philosophy, but in metaphysics and aesthetics also. Yet Kant, the pre-eminent theorist of personhood, whose work through his appropriation by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas has become central to normative political philosophy as well as ethics, has also a more dubious accomplishment to his (dis)credit: being one of the founders—or (for some theorists) *the* founder—of modern “scientific” racism. As such, he wonderfully illustrates the combination of light and darkness in the “white” Enlightenment’s racial liberalism. Until recently, when the challenge from scholars of race made some response unavoidable, mainstream white political philosophers and ethicists had for the most part scrupulously avoided any mention of his racist writings in anthropology and physical geography. Now the dominant line of argument is that they are embarrassing and should of course be condemned, but they form no part of his *philosophy*. In chapter 6, “Kant’s *Untermenschen*,” I challenge this conceptual segregation and ask whether it would not be more theoretically fruitful to explore the possible presence in Kant’s work of a philosophical anthropology of persons and sub-persons, thereby inevitably raising questions about the standard

interpretations of the prescriptions of his ethics, political philosophy, and teleology.

The seeming demise of Marxism—though as I write this introduction in 2016, the worsening conditions of plutocracy, not merely in the United States but globally, must surely be fostering a rethinking¹⁰—has taken “exploitation” off the table as a subject for moral analysis. Exploitation is assumed to be necessarily tied to the labor theory of value, long repudiated not merely by mainstream economists but by even most contemporary Marxists. But a concept of exploitation can easily be developed that is straightforwardly condemnable by respectable liberal criteria: exploitation as the “using” of people for illicit benefit and unjust enrichment. Marx famously contrasted the transparent exploitation of slave and feudal societies with the more opaque exploitation of capitalism, which, resting as it did on “free” wage-labor and voluntary consent, generally needed theoretical work to uncover. But racial exploitation in modernity was originally as transparently exploitative as (or even more transparently exploitative than) exploitation in pre-modern systems. Racial chattel slavery, aboriginal expropriation, colonial forced labor, and so forth are paradigms of non-consensual coercive systems directed by liberal polities at home and abroad. Yet they have not received the attention they deserve in liberal descriptive and normative theory for what they say about the actual architecture of the liberal state and its supervision of the wrongful transfer of wealth and opportunities from people of color to whites. In chapter 7, “Racial Exploitation,” I argue for a revival of the concept of exploitation in philosophical discourse that could be brought into fruitful engagement with the by now large body of literature in sociology and economics on racial differentials in wealth and how they serve to perpetuate racial inequality.

Part II of the book focuses on Rawls, Rawlsianism, and white political philosophy more generally. My claim is that most of this work either exemplifies the racial liberalism I am critiquing or adopts strategies for addressing and correcting it that are, in my opinion, going to be inadequate.

Chapter 8, “Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls,” examines the writings of the person generally regarded (certainly in Anglo-American analytic philosophical circles) as the most important American political philosopher of the twentieth century, and, for some, the most important political philosopher, period, of the twentieth century. I try to bring out the absurdity of the leading American philosopher of justice having nothing substantive to say over his working lifetime about what has historically been the most salient form of American *injustice*, racial domination. Moreover, by analyzing the underpinnings of Rawlsian ideal theory, I try to make the stronger case not merely that Rawls and Rawlsians *have not* addressed the issue of racism, but that the apparatus itself hinders them from doing so adequately,

not merely contingently but also structurally. In the conclusion, I point the reader to my own work in my 2007 book with Carole Pateman, *Contract and Domination*, where I argue that retrieving the Rawlsian apparatus for racial justice and non-ideal theory will require radical changes in it.¹¹

The natural follow-up is a look at the work of Tommie Shelby, since he—as a black philosopher at Harvard, Rawls’s home institution for most of his career—is the most prominent African American representative of the position that, contra my claims, Rawls’s apparatus as is can indeed be used to tackle racial injustice. In chapter 9, “Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice?,” I do a detailed analysis of one of Shelby’s articles and explain why I think his attempted appropriation of Rawls (an extension to race of Rawls’s “fair equality of opportunity” principle) cannot work. I should emphasize here that I do not, of course, see Shelby as *himself* an exponent of racial liberalism but rather as a philosopher trying, as I am, to correct it. But my contention is that the racial liberalism that for me Rawls represents is more deeply embedded in the apparatus and thus requires more conceptual rethinking and reworking of that apparatus than Shelby recognizes.

Chapter 10, “The Whiteness of Political Philosophy,” takes a retrospective look at the evolution (and non-evolution) of the field in the many years since my graduation. Commissioned by the hyperactive (in a good way) George Yancy for a volume bringing together seventeen black and Hispanic/Latino philosophers to reflect on their experiences in the profession, it offers both an account of how much progress has been made in recent decades in Africana philosophy and race as legitimate philosophical areas of research, and how far we still have to go. Though there has been a burgeoning of literature in the discipline, the low demographic numbers of black philosophers and people of color generally, and the radicalness of the challenge race poses to conventional ways of doing philosophy, somewhat temper one’s optimism about its future. Using a well-known companion to political philosophy as a representative target, I point out how “white” its conceptual framework and underlying assumptions are, paying virtually no attention to the large body of work in post-colonial theory and critical race theory not just in philosophy but across many other disciplines.

Finally, in an epilogue that is simultaneously a prologue (in gesturing toward what I intend to be a future project), I sketch the contours of what I am calling a “black radical liberalism.” Taxonomies of Africana political thought have traditionally opposed black radicalism and black liberalism, the latter seen as necessarily committed to mainstream white norms and assumptions, even if adjusted somewhat for racial difference. But in keeping with the overall line of argument of this book, I make a case here for a different variety of black liberalism, one radicalized by taking seriously (in a way that mainstream black liberalism does not) the shaping of the modern

world by white supremacy. Black radical liberalism as an emancipatory ideology will of course have to be supplemented and modified by the experience of other racially subordinated communities. But given the centrality of African slavery and subsequent anti-black oppression to the making of modernity, it represents a crucial step toward the comprehensive theorization and reconstruction of the deracialized, color-conscious liberalism for which I am calling.

The promise of liberalism was famously the granting of equal rights to all individuals, destroying the old social hierarchies and establishing a new social order where everybody, as an individual, could flourish, free of “estate” membership. But the reality turned out to be the preservation, albeit on a new theoretical foundation, of old hierarchies of gender and the establishment of new hierarchies of race. Thus the struggle to realize the liberal ideal for everybody and not just a privileged minority still continues today, centuries later. If this struggle is ever to be successful, a prerequisite must be the acknowledgment of the extent to which dominant varieties of liberalism have developed so as to be complicit with rather than in opposition to social oppression. I hope that by formally identifying the ideological phenomenon of “racial liberalism” as a subject for research and critique, this book will contribute both to its analysis and its eventual dismantling, as theory and as practice.

PART I

Racial Liberalism

Epistemology, Personhood, Property

CHAPTER 1

New Left Project Interview with Charles Mills

1. *The concept of “race” as an objective category has long been discredited by anthropology and biology, yet the social sciences show that racial disadvantage persists. How do you understand the concept of race and racism?*

On this side of the Atlantic, a lot of work has been done over the past twenty years in critical race theory to develop what could be called a “successor concept” of race. In other words, we’ve inherited a concept that was central to the justification of imperialism, colonialism, African slavery, Jim Crow, apartheid, the “color bar,” and the “color line.” And the question then is, What should anti-racist theorists and activists seeking to dismantle the legacy of these systems and practices do with it?

One obvious option is eliminativism—drop the concept from one’s vocabulary and discourse altogether. On this line of analysis, “race” should be seen as comparable to “phlogiston”—a term designating an element within combustible substances supposedly released during the process of combustion. The French chemist Lavoisier showed that combustion does not actually take place by this process, and that in fact phlogiston does not exist. So “phlogiston” as a concept is scientifically refuted, is doing no work for us, and should just be dropped.

But contrast that with “witch.” Witches in the sense of evil women with supernatural powers don’t actually exist either, so those unfortunate women burned at the stake for this sin were not really witches. But the term is retained in contemporary usage, not just to refer to characters in fantasy novels or films (the White Witch of C. S. Lewis’s Narnia novels) but also to indicate a believer in the Wiccan religion. “Witch” has been reconceived.

Now “race” is arguably more like “witch” than “phlogiston” in that many social and political theorists have contended it can still do useful work for us. So for these theorists (anti-eliminativists), it is better to retain the term. “Race” is redefined so that it is purged of its unscientific and morally pernicious associations. Instead of seeing race biologically, and as part of a natural hierarchy, one reconceptualizes it so it refers to one’s structural location in a racialized social system, thereby generating a successor concept. People are “raced” according to particular rules—we shift from a noun to a verb, from a pre-existing “natural” state to an active social process—and these ascribed racial identities then tendentially shape their moral standing, civic status, social world, and life chances. In that sense, race obviously does exist, and we can talk about “whites” being privileged and “nonwhites” being disadvantaged by particular racial systems without implying any biological referent.

“Racism” has been given various competing definitions and attributed competing areas of application. I would distinguish between racism in the ideational sense (a complex of ideas, beliefs, values) and racism in the socio-institutional sense (institutions, practices, social systems). For the first sense, I would favor this definition: racism is the belief that (i) humanity can be divided into discrete races, and (ii) these races are hierarchically arranged, with some races superior to others. The second sense would then refer to institutions, practices, and social systems that illicitly privilege some races at the expense of others, where racial membership (directly or indirectly) explains this privileging.

2. *If the earlier, more overt, forms of racism (asserting the inherent inferiority of non-whites) were rooted in the political economy of chattel slavery and colonialism, what are the politico-economic factors behind racism today? In other words, what continues to drive racism?*

In a phrase, I would say it’s the political economy of racialized capitalism: the legacy of these systems (chattel slavery, colonialism) both globally (as North-South domination) and in particular nations (the former colonizing powers, the former colonies, the former white settler states). White-over-nonwhite racism is not, of course, the only variety—one also has to take into account intra-Asian and intra-African racism, as well as Latin American variants where racial antagonisms affect relations between Afro-Latins and indigenous peoples. But obviously on a global scale, white domination has been the most important kind, and some of the latter examples are themselves influenced by the colonial history, as with the Belgian shaping of Tutsi-Hutu relations in Rwanda. So this inherited system of structural advantage and disadvantage, which was heavily racialized, continues

to affect life chances today, thereby reproducing “race” and racial identities as crucial social categories. Where whites are a significant population, they are generally privileged by their racial membership (I say more about this under #6, below), and their resistance to giving up this privilege manifests itself in racial ideologies of various kinds. So racism is most illuminatingly seen in this social and historical context—as an ever-evolving ideology linked with group domination and illicit advantage—rather than in the framework of individual “prejudice” favored by mainstream social theory.

3. *Before we get onto the idea of “racial liberalism,” could you first outline what you mean by liberalism?*

By liberalism I mean the ideology that arises in Europe in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries in opposition to feudal absolutism, predicated on the equal rights of morally equal individuals, and having as its key figures such political thinkers as John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. Obviously, as even this brief list indicates, there are many different strains within liberalism: contractarian versus utilitarian versions, property-and-self-ownership-based versus personhood-based versions, right-wing laissez-faire liberalism versus left-wing social-democratic liberalism. But in theory all these different variants are supposed to be committed to the flourishing of the individual.

What I call “racial liberalism” is then a liberalism in which—independent of which particular version we’re considering—key terms have been rewritten by race so as to generate a different set of rules for members of different “races,” R1s and R2s, because (historically) the R2s don’t meet the criteria of the capacity for attaining individuality. So I am following the example of second-wave feminist liberals from the 1970s onward and arguing that we need to see liberalism as structurally shaped in its development by group privilege—in this case, white racial privilege. “Racial liberalism” as a theoretical construct is then supposed to be analogous to “patriarchal liberalism.”

4. *There is little overt racism in political theory today. In what way is liberal political theory still compromised by the issue of race?*

Again, the feminist model and theoretical precedent is very useful here. Women active in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s who went into the academy and into political theory came to the realization that the “maleness” of the work of the central canonical figures ran deeper than stigmatizing references to women, though these were offensive enough. Overtly sexist patriarchal liberalism explicitly represents women as lesser creatures

not deserving of equal rights, appropriately to be subjected to male authority, not permitted to vote or own property, having their legal identity subsumed into their husbands' under the doctrine of coverture, and so on. But the point second-wave feminists made was that even now, when formal gender equality has been attained and sexism is officially repudiated, liberalism remains patriarchal in its conceptualization of the official polity, its view of the individual, its division of society into public and private spheres, its exclusion of the family from the ambit of justice, and so forth. So for substantive as against merely nominal gender inclusiveness, what is necessary is a rethinking of inherited political categories from the perspective of women, a rethinking guided by the desire to achieve genuine gender inclusivity in the cartography of the political and thus facilitate the struggle for genuine gender equity in the polity itself.

You can see how this line of argument can be adopted and translated for race. My similar claim would be that liberal political theory is so shaped by the history of white domination, both national and global, that, analogously, it tacitly takes as its representative political figure the white (male) subject. The parallel is not perfect, since male domination/patriarchy already exists at the dawn of modernity, whereas European domination/white supremacy does not. So you don't get the same taken-for-grantedness of the rightness of European rule that you get for male rule—it's more contested. Jennifer Pitts's *A Turn to Empire*, for example, is subtitled *The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*,¹ and her point is to demarcate a transition from an early liberalism with significant anti-racist and anti-imperialist elements to a later liberalism more uniformly racist and imperialist. But the dominant variety does, of course, eventually become a liberalism that assumes the superiority of Europe as the global civilization, and the identity of Europeans as the appropriate agents of the civilizing process. John Locke invests in African slavery and justifies aboriginal expropriation; Immanuel Kant turns out to be one of the pioneering theorists of modern "scientific" racism; Georg Hegel's World Spirit animates the (very material and non-spiritual) colonial enterprise; and John Stuart Mill, employee of the British East India Company, denies the capacity of barbarian races in their "nonage" to rule themselves.

The way in which contemporary liberalism is still compromised by race is, in my opinion, in the failure to rethink itself in the light of this history. Liberalism needs to be reconceptualized as ideologically central to the imperial project; both colonial and imperial domination need to be recognized as political systems in themselves (so, as with the gender critique, the boundaries of the polity would be redrawn); liberalism's official ontology needs to officially admit races as social existents (they're already tacitly there); and above all, in normative political theory (the

distinctive terrain of political philosophy), racial justice needs to be placed at center stage.

5. *What causes the “color-blindness” of liberal political theory?*

To begin with, there’s just the huge weight of the European tradition’s focus on the white political subject (which we’re now to read as the generic colorless political subject), and the thousands of books and tens of thousands of articles over the years that take it for granted, thereby constituting an overwhelmingly hegemonic set of norms for what counts as “real” political theory. Perhaps one could also add that it’s just theoretically simpler and easier to operate as if people of color can be subsumed under these categories without rethinking them. And it could be argued that group interest plays a role: the interests of a largely white profession in not having these troubling questions raised, given their disruptive implications for the social order that racial liberalism has rationalized and from which whites benefit.

6. *Radicals argue that it is impossible to realize the liberal vision of class equality within the framework of a capitalist system. Is the same true of race? How do you see race as relating to class and can racism be defeated without fundamental social change?*

One’s view of the relation of race and class will obviously depend on one’s larger social theory. Within the Marxist tradition, various attempts have been made to give a historical materialist explanation of race and racism, usually centering (as your second question intimated) on claims about the peculiar political economy of imperial capitalism and the articulation of modern African slavery to its workings. Class-reductionist versions would represent race as “really” being class in disguise, class in nonwhite skin—non-wage-labor in the form of slavery, or as sub-proletarianized labor. Other versions, drawing on Gramsci, would talk about race as ideology, as a particular way of being in the world and making sense of that world.

My own sympathies are with attempts to combine the materialist dynamic that is crucial for Marxism with a theorization that takes account of issues like personhood less well theorized in the Marxist tradition. In my own work, I have argued that we need to see white supremacy as a system of domination in its own right, whose dynamic—even if it is originally generated by expansionist capitalism—then attains a “relative autonomy” of its own. So when, in the United States, for example, the white working class excludes blacks from unions and joins lynch mobs, they are not just (as a top-down, bourgeois manipulation model would have it) serving capitalist interests but affirming and developing an identity that, in certain respects,

pays off for them. David Roediger, inspired by E. P. Thompson, argues in his *The Wages of Whiteness* that the white American working class *makes itself* as white.²

In the United States, whites in general, including the white working class, benefit materially from their whiteness in numerous ways: the original expropriation of the continent from Native Americans; the diffusion within the white economy generally of the surplus from slave labor; the differential access to jobs, promotions, bank loans, transfer payments from the state; the benefits of segregated housing and consequent wealth accumulation. A 2015 online report, for example, says that because of the recession and the subprime meltdown the median wealth of white households is now (2011 figures) *sixteen times* the median wealth of black households and *thirteen times* the median wealth of Latino households.³

So for me it is a mistake, as the left tradition has too often done, to see only class—one's relationship to the means of production in the famous "base" of the base-and-superstructure—as material, and to only recognize class exploitation. Socialist feminists in the 1970s–1980s argued that we needed to see capitalist patriarchy as a dual system, in which gender was part of the material base also. I would claim that this needs to be extended to race. Races as social entities exist and are connected in relations of racial exploitation. So the "big three"—class, gender, race—are all part of a political economy of domination. And race is material also, both in terms of economic advantage/disadvantage and in terms of patterns of social cognition being shaped by the body. It's not a biological materiality (that would be biological determinism); it's a social materiality rooted in the relation between the individual body and the body politic that needs to be conceptually differentiated from class, even if class forces explain its origins. (That would be a point of disanalogy with gender, which predates class.)

My own view of the race/class differentiation is that race is originally the demarcator of full and diminished personhood. The white working class in capitalist modernity do attain personhood status; the Native American or Native Australian, the African slave, the colonial subject, do not.

You can see why this would immediately seem very problematic from the perspective of orthodox Marxism. I am claiming to be sympathetic to materialism and yet giving theoretical centrality to a moral category! But bear in mind that what I really mean is (in the Hegelian tradition, materialistically understood) *socially recognized* personhood. Race functions as a "materially embedded" moral category, signifying membership or non-membership in the subset of humans recognized as fully human, and linked to the materialist political economy of Euro-domination. So what we have is a triple system involving the interaction of one's relationship to the means