

# Reflections on Charles Mills

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**Abstract:** Charles Mills adhered to the highest standards of philosophical scholarship, while seeing his work firmly as a contribution to the cause of social justice. He had a deep appreciation for historical context and a history of ideas approach to racial/philosophical questions. He was one of the foremost Rawls interpreters of our time, though only a few years before his passing was he so recognized. He channeled his analytic training in his habit of demonstrating how a view is strengthened when an author shows how objections can be systematically replied to. I wish he had tried to integrate class and race into a larger theoretical system, of both an explanatory and normative character. Class is sometimes an unnoted presence in his explanation of white supremacy. Charles saw himself contributing to a collective scholarly social justice project and was happy to acknowledge the greater expertise of others in allied areas to his.

**Key words:** Please provide 5–10 key words for your article.

I am from a different generation than most others in this symposium and in the event at the California Roundtable on Philosophy and Race in which I presented an earlier version of these remarks. I came up in Philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s when race was absolutely not seen as an appropriate or even possible *philosophical* topic. I can remember what it was like, no doubt at least partly due to being white, to have a view of philosophy in which there was no room for race. Philosophy dealt with “the universal,” not a particular social identity. I remember holding that view when Bernie Boxill, Lucius Outlaw, Anita Allen, Howard McGary, and many other African American philosophers of that (my) generation were, in the 1980s, pushing on philosophy to make room for, and to apply its own methods and sensibilities to, racial matters. I remember “not getting it,” even though I identified as a radical and was concerned about racism.

Eventually the pioneering work of this generation, recognized and celebrated at a conference, *Pioneers of Africana Philosophy*, that Linda Alcoff and Charles helped to organize at CUNY in spring 2021, forced me to rethink what philosophy was and could do. Now I can barely envision a conception of philosophy in which racial concerns are not squarely in its mainstream.

Charles was of a slightly younger generation and did not play that awakening role for me. I had already joined the “philosophy and race” project when I met him and encountered his work in the 1990s. But of course I am profoundly grateful for Charles’s staggering contributions to that field, which have deeply shaped my own work, though probably less than it should have. I feel I am still working on incorporating his insights, especially about the systematicity of white dominance, and “unjust white benefit” as he sometimes puts it, with its normative implications.

I knew Charles for many years without knowing him well. The most extended period of time I spent with him was in January 2017, when he and I were invited as participants and consultants to a conference at Rhodes University in South Africa. The purpose was to help the South African philosophy profession, then extremely traditional and white-dominated but with black students and a few young black faculty demanding an opening up of the philosophical canon and of the South African profession’s customary ways of operating. Charles and I traveled home together, a long jaunt from Grahamstown, that involved us spending several hours en route in the Johannesburg airport. These few hours turned out to be exactly when the “Women’s March” against Trump at his inauguration was taking place. We commiserated about being stuck in an airport while the Resistance was making its presence felt, declaring that especially women were not going to stop protesting this racist, reactionary and profoundly sexist president. Because of Charles’s deep commitment to feminism our inability to participate was especially painful for him, though as you would expect he used a good dose of humor to help the two of us watch, ruefully, tiny images of the demonstrations on our phones.

In trying to frame an overall take on Charles’s intellectual contribution to philosophy and race studies, I want first to take note of what a great scholar Charles was. While never abandoning the social justice project that animated his work, he also always adhered, in his distinctly scholarly writings, to the highest standards of scholarship. For example, he wrote two articles on Kant, weighing in on the scholarly debate about how to think not only about Kant’s racist remarks but also about his theory of racial hierarchy, in light of the strong egalitarian commitments of his moral and political philosophy. These articles are incredibly thoroughly

grounded in the work of leading Kant scholars who address this concern (Wood, Louden, Kleingeld), and race scholars like Eze and Bernasconi who do so as well. Charles shows the deepest respect for scholarship about historical context, and for the significance of a history of ideas approach, as well as a close textual reading of the relevant Kantian works and passages. In general, Charles recognizes the importance of history to philosophy in thinking about race—both the history concerning debates about when racial thinking starts to make its appearance in the West, and the history of systems of racial oppression once it does.

Charles was also, it should be said, one of the great Rawls scholars of our time; but he is seldom seen that way. Perhaps a better way to say it is that he was a great Rawls interpreter. When you think of people whose reading of Rawls provides particularly original and insightful approaches to thinking about Rawls, Charles is surely in that company. Remember that Charles is saying not only that Rawls neglects race and that his investment in “ideal theory” is a primary reason for this. He also, especially in his later work, both analyzes in much greater detail the ways that race is a lacuna in Rawls, and also turns to a reading of Rawls to mine the liberal tradition for intellectual resources for an adequate theory of racial justice and racial liberation. A conference in January 2019 to take stock of Rawls, forty-eight years after *Theory of Justice*, was full of older and newer Rawls luminaries; but Charles was not among them. Many people remarked on this “oversight,” and I think that is the last time Charles was omitted from the highest rank of Rawls interpreters. (He was invited to speak on Rawls at the Harvard Philosophy Department the following year, unveiling his latest and always evolving thinking about Rawls.)

Another virtue of Charles’s work is that he always saw himself as just one among a much wider circle of scholars animated by a racial and social justice mission. As part of this he was always happy to acknowledge the expertise and contributions of others, and to think and speak of them as comrades in arms in a politically informed intellectual project. Related to this, Charles was very non-dogmatic and always open to and welcoming of criticism. It was all part of his intellectual expansiveness but also his political commitments and situatedness. He expressed that overarching political commitment in his somewhat unusual dedications. *Blackness Visible* is dedicated to “a better vision for the world”; *From Class to Race* is dedicated to “the left, black and white”; and *Black Rights/White Wrongs* is “Toward a deracialized liberalism.” And my favorite, *The Racial Contract*: “This book is dedicated to the blacks, reds, browns, and yellows who have resisted the Racial Contract and the white renegades and race traitors who have resisted it.”

As others at the memorials I attended in the wake of his passing testified, Charles was also an extremely generous senior scholar to younger scholars coming up in the critical philosophy of race sub-field. I am emphasizing a different but related virtue of inclusion of other scholars in a shared politically informed project.

A further aspect of Charles's work that I found very powerful is expressed in the "reply to objections" way he structured many of his articles. He would present an initial idea, say the idea of racial exploitation, or the suitability of "white supremacy" as a term for a political system. Many, most, of these ideas would be quite radical from the vantage point of mainstream philosophy. He then followed this presentation with a section of "objections and replies." There he looked around for objections that had been made to the position just spelled out, and for ones that could be made.

Two articles, from different periods of his life, illustrate this well. One is from *Blackness Visible* (1998), "Revisionist Ontologies: Theorizing White Supremacy." This now classic article, which I always used in my Race and Racism course, is one of Charles's earliest attempts to theorize white supremacy. The article defends the term "global white supremacy" (GWS) as the most apt way to conceptualize the global system Charles encouraging getting his readers to acknowledge. He proceeds in part by contrasting GWS with other terms that have been or could plausibly be employed to name that, or similar, systems. He mentions in this context "imperialism," "colonial capitalism," "racism," and "white racism." The resultant discussion provides a brilliant mapping of these different but related concepts and phenomena, as well as of "global white supremacy."

Charles goes on to examine several distinct criticisms that can be made of the GWS formulation, for example, (1) this formulation implies that white supremacy as a political system is autonomous and explanatorily distinct from other systems of domination in the same societies in which it exists, (2) that the ideologies of white supremacy have been repudiated in societies in which Charles says that white supremacy still holds sway, (3) that the concept of "race" is no longer reputable explanatorily, (4) that the concept of GWS is pitched at too high a level of abstraction to be useful. Charles then provides brief but incredibly pointed and insightful discussions of these objections to GWS.

Charles does something similar in his 2012 "Occupy Liberalism," an article partly responding to the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. In this essay Charles is arguing for a position he continued to develop in the 2010s, that anti-racists should embrace liberalism as a core political philosophy, but that the version required to deal with historical and

continuing white supremacy must be “radical.” He replies to ten objections that liberalism cannot be radicalized in that way. Just for a flavor of the range of objections Charles takes up, here are four—that liberalism cannot recognize groups and group oppression; that liberal humanist individualism is naïve about the subject (a Foucauldian/Althusserian objection); that liberalism is necessarily anti-socialist, so can’t be radical; that liberalism’s enlightenment origins commit to the view that moral suasion and rational discourse are “the societal prime movers.”

Charles’s approach in these (as in many other) articles involves a wonderful intellectual discipline and depth, demonstrating how a view is strengthened when an author shows how objections can be systematically replied to. To restate a radical view that some might misread or misrepresent, in relationship to objections, helps clarify it. This discipline is a standard feature of what is commonly referred to as “analytical philosophy.” And Charles does identify as in the analytic tradition, though drawing on different traditions for the content of his theorizing.<sup>1</sup> But this objections-and-replies dimension of his work remains a real strength. The discipline of trying to think of, and look around for, objections to one’s view is in itself salutary, and the way Charles carried out that regimen was remarkable.

I want to speak now about a lacuna I felt in the body of Charles’s work—a failure to engage in a systematic way in an attempt to bring together race and class as systems of domination. But let me start by recognizing a point Linda Alcoff made at one of the memorials for Charles, that he was a deeply committed progressive, tuned into labor and class-based struggles from early on, since his time in Jamaica. He saw his concern with race as inextricably connected with the political struggles of other marginal or subordinated groups, and keenly kept up with overall political developments in the US and around the world.

I frequently saw this commitment myself, in conversations with Charles. He seemed to have an overall social democratic outlook, of a sort now being referred to as “progressive” in the American context. He expresses this in a statement from his “Occupy Liberalism” essay: “The ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement provides an opportunity unprecedented in decades to build a broad democratic movement to challenge plutocracy, patriarchy, and white supremacy in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that Charles speaks of “plutocracy” rather than capitalism, and I am not being critical of this, and want rather to note that he is placing a

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1. “[M]y training is actually in the analytic tradition and theoretically and methodologically it is here that I am at home,” Mills, “Introduction,” xix.
  2. “Occupy Wall Street,” 10.

class-related domination system alongside his more usual targets, white supremacy and patriarchy, as needing political activity to overthrow in the cause of justice.

However, what I have not seen in Charles's philosophical work was an attempt at an intellectual integration of the ways these multiple systems of domination, multiple axes of oppression operated in US society or in the West more generally. To be sure Charles eloquently articulated the need for that integrative, intersectional perspective. And he did attempt to provide it in the case of gender in his book with Carole Pateman. However, while I have by no means read everything Charles wrote, I have not seen a systematic account of class domination *integrated with* an account of racial domination in anything of his I have read.

This is not exactly a criticism. No single individual has to cover every, even important, angle of his subject. I think part of the reason Charles had not yet gotten around to this project may be that when he brought up class-related issues he was usually pointing to shortcomings of the Marxist tradition, analogous to those of the liberal tradition, or to Rawls, in failing to recognize white supremacy. Charles was a Marxist in his youth and his early publications concerned Marxism. He was working his way out of that tradition and wanting to speak to its current adherents about its racial blind spots.<sup>3</sup>

In the essay "Racial Exploitation" Charles does link race and class (though not as systems of domination). He there makes a point echoed in other writings, that different groups' views on racial justice are to a great extent dictated by its group-based interests, more than by its espoused moral principles. In this light, he examines how white workers might be brought to support a program of racial justice aimed to benefit Blacks, since they would not themselves benefit from improving the situation of Blacks. But Charles then envisions either a social democratic program or a socialist program (not identifying the two) that improves the situation of all workers, and in that way benefits both white and Black workers, thus at least partly also addressing issues of racial justice. He comments "the presumption being that a convincing case can be made that though

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3. At the same time, Charles also made the point that when he first started working on race, in the late 1980s, he borrowed important aspects of Marxist analysis—not in the sense that he said race could be ultimately understood in class terms, a view he definitively rejects—but in the sense that, just as Marx provides a structuralist analysis of capitalism as a social system, so he would see race as a social system, not fundamentally about individual prejudices but, as "white supremacy," as a distinct socio-economic-political system of domination. (See Mills, "Red Shift," the introductory chapter to *Radical Theory, Caribbean Reality*.)

they [i.e. white workers] do gain in this present order [i.e. through white supremacy], they lose by comparison to an alternative one [i.e. the envisioned social democratic or socialist alternative]."<sup>4</sup> That is, even if white workers would lose their white privilege in a non-white-supremacist socio-economic order, they would gain more than they lost by improving their lot in the envisioned social democratic or socialist order that ended white supremacy.

This insight about how to appeal to white workers in a white supremacist and plutocratic social order depends on an accompanying analysis of our current situation that involves integrating race and class as processes involved in domination orders. It is this integrated analysis of class and race that Charles hadn't gotten around to attempting (not saying that he was intending to), and that I wish he had.

Look for example at the following passage, which incidentally also illustrates Charles's remarkable ability to move between an incredibly complex theoretical line of thought to pivot immediately to a detailed analysis of on-the-ground forces:

[T]he different forms of exploitation interact with one another, exacerbating the situation. For example, blacks receive inferior education, thereby losing an equal opportunity to build human capital, thereby losing out in competition with white candidates, thereby having to take inferior jobs, thereby having less money, thereby being disadvantaged in dealings with banks that are already following patterns of mortgage discrimination, thereby being forced to live in inferior neighborhoods, thereby having homes of lesser value, thereby providing a lower tax base for schooling, thereby being unable to pass on to their children advantages comparable to whites, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

The passage highlights a complex racially discriminatory and unjust disparity-producing process. (It is also vintage Charles in bringing together in brief compass so many different pieces of an overall picture).

But the racial inequities that result from that complex historical process depend on class-based processes, or processes connected to a capitalist, market, or plutocratic system as background conditions, that Charles

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4. Mills, "Racial Exploitation," 133. Here Charles is making a point that applies equally to social democratic (and so capitalist) and socialist orders—that they both improve the plight of workers of all races in comparison to their plight in the current "plutocratic." He is not denying significant differences between social democracy and socialism, only making the more minimal point that both improve the plight of workers of all races compared to the current US form of capitalism and white supremacy.

5. *Ibid.*, 130.

does not mention here. Just to mention three: (1) The resultant *degree* of educational, housing, wealth creation disparities will be shaped not only by the direct racially discriminatory practices mentioned, but the *overall* level of economic disparity between income or wealth-defined groups. (2) The housing processes mentioned depend on assuming a system of almost entirely privately provided housing, subject to market forces (which then open the door to racially discriminatory home valuing as well as bank lending).<sup>6</sup> If more housing were provided outside the market system, as a right (in accordance with a current push for “social housing” that has been adopted in some municipalities), the racial discrimination would lose some of its scope of operation and the degree of racial housing disparities would be diminished. (3) The educational disparities mentioned depend in part on school funding being tied to the local property tax base. The US does not have to employ that system. Most nations don’t, and the property-based system was challenged, almost successfully, in the 1973 *Rodriguez* case, at the Supreme Court level.<sup>7</sup> Racial disparities are partly created by this class-based feature of the education funding system, that then interacts with other more distinctly racial processes.

In all three cases the character and degree of racial disparity cannot be understood without taking account of class- or capitalism-based processes. Indeed, there are few racial phenomena in US society that can be understood entirely separate from a class perspective. Yet few philosophers have taken up the challenge of the required integrated analysis, and Charles did so to only a minimal extent.<sup>8</sup>

In the Introduction to his 2003 collection *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*, Charles addresses the issue of a class-race synthesis as he was thinking about it at that time. He wants to be sure his readers do not interpret the title of that book, and its final section “Critical Race Theory,” as meaning that he has abandoned a Marxist, historical materialist framework of analysis entirely. He calls for a rethinking of that tradition that “would have to be more thorough than most white Marxists have so far been willing to undertake.”<sup>9</sup> But in this book he is bracketing “the possibility of a theoretical synthesis” and discussing only white supremacy. In an essay in this collection he suggests that race

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6. For an integrated, historical, treatment of racial discrimination in a housing system beholden to private, market provision, see Taylor, *Race for Profit*.

7. *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1 (1973).

8. I make this critique, of philosophy more generally and of Charles specifically, in much greater detail in “Race and Class Together,” forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

9. Mills, “Introduction,” xvii.



is more causally fundamental than class (or gender) but denies that class considerations can be reduced to class ones.<sup>10</sup> (I think he also thinks it is normatively more important—that is, that race oppression is morally worse than class oppression—but does not take that view explicitly in this essay.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Charles acknowledges, and not reluctantly, that class is a factor in its own right, and, at least by implication, that an explanation of the social order of the United States would have to take account of both race and class.<sup>12</sup> He does not attempt such a synthesis in any of the works with which I am familiar, and I miss his wisdom on this matter.<sup>13</sup>

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10. "European Specters," 163–64.

11. Charles argues that some oppressions are morally worse than others but does not apply this point (which he calls "oppression asymmetry") explicitly to a comparison of race and class. "European Specters," 163. But he carries both the causal and the moral primacy of race over class, as well as an avoidance of the claim that class oppression or injustice can be reduced to race ones, into the later essays that I cite in this essay.

12. I am grateful to a reader for *Radical Philosophy Review* for calling "European Specters" to my attention with respect to its relevance to my criticism of Charles on the need for a class-race synthesis.

13. In a 2007 essay on Stuart Hall, the Jamaican/British cultural and race theorist, in the *Radical Theory, Caribbean Reality* collection, Charles surveys Hall's evolving views (from 1977 to 1997) on race, culture, and Marxism. He criticizes Hall for nearly abandoning, in his later work, a recognition that black oppression has an economic, material dimension, in tandem with Hall's inflation (as Charles sees it) of the importance of "culture." He writes, "One gets little sense in the later essays of the extent to which race continues to be tied up with unreconstructed, old-fashioned matters of economic privilege and disadvantage, of access to and exclusion from job opportunities and wealth creation, of class mobility and class stasis" (Mills, "Stuart Hall's Changing Representations of 'Race,'" 208). My point about Charles is partly that I think that to some extent he himself also fails to highlight these material dimensions in his later writings on race, e.g. in *Black Rights/White Wrongs*; but, equally significantly, as the quote in the text about housing, neighborhood, wealth, and educational disparities expresses, when he does highlight this material dimension, he generally omits the distinctly class dimensions of the processes that produce them. More generally I am lamenting that he did not attempt to produce an integrating analysis of how class and race processes work together to produce systemic racial disparities. I am somewhat distinguishing this project from the meaning Charles attaches to "intersectionality" in this essay, as "theor[izing] multiple identities, particularly of the subordinated" (196). The envisioned project would be an analysis of the social/economic position of the subordinated, not so much their identity. Of course these two things are related, but they are not the same thing.

Let me close by joining my comrades here in tributing a great radical philosopher, and mourning his loss. I have deeply missed Charles, his brilliance, his generosity, his remarkable sense of humor, and his political passion, and I'm sure I will continue to do so. We must carry on the legacy he bequeathed to us, and I will try to do so.

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