

---

## Review

# The color of our shame: Race and justice in our time

Christopher J. Lebron

Oxford University Press, 2009, xi+202 pp., \$74.00, ISBN: 978-0199936342

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2015) **14**, e50–e53. doi:10.1057/cpt.2014.49;  
published online 4 November 2014

*The Color of Our Shame*, Christopher J. Lebron's account of racial injustice in the United States, is essential reading for students and scholars of liberalism, democracy and racial inequality. The book weaves moral and political philosophy together with a discussion of US institutions, highlighting the ways in which they sustain and propagate unjust racial formations. It is a compelling book, rich in detail and ambitious in scope. The argument proceeds as follows: (i) racial inequality can be explained by United States' failure to afford blacks<sup>1</sup> equal social value with whites; (ii) racial inequality as a problem of social value persists because of bad character; (iii) shame is the appropriate moral emotion we should feel in light of this failure to grant equal social value, since it shows we have failed to live up to our professed liberal democratic principles; (iv) having failed to live up to our principles, we must strive to perfect them and the institutions they shape.

The language of 'failure to live up' to values 'we' share recurs throughout the philosophical and psychological literature on shame, and Lebron mobilizes it to great effect. Like Christina Tarnopolsky, Jennifer Manion, Farid Abdel Nour and others, Lebron deploys shame to inspire us to live up to who we claim to be and what we claim to value – not simply to *do* better but to *be* better than we currently are. He writes, 'We are not generally morally corrupt people but we are in moral error of a most significant kind' (p. 41). Lebron therefore begins his study with an assumed 'we' who are committed to liberal democratic principles – 'the ship of liberal democracy as a shared political project has already cast off' (p. 15); we will feel shame once we realize how far the United States has drifted from them on issues of racial equality – 'there is a reliable normative consensus on this question [of blacks' and whites' moral equality]' (p. 20). Our agreement is not in question according to Lebron; the challenge is to bring our behavior in line with principles we already affirm. Here Lebron differentiates the relative consensus about moral equality with regard to race with the more obviously divisive debates about abortion rights and the death penalty. Americans may *disagree* about the moral status of fetuses and

women's reproductive rights and deploy the tactic of 'moral outrage' in these political contests, but we *agree* about the moral status of all persons and understand democracy as requiring 'equal consideration of each citizen's well-being' (p. 61). Read in this way, the quest for racial equality involves moral correction rather than political confrontation. Lebron argues that shame can do the work of moral correction because, unlike moral outrage, it builds on our already-existing moral agreement.

The premise of a coherent American subject – expressed as 'we' – also grounds Lebron's optimism about American citizens' aspirations to live as racial egalitarians susceptible to being shamed into eradicating racial inequality. This work involves us all. Whites are the obvious beneficiaries of the racial inequality Lebron details, and whites therefore have a corresponding greater burden of shame to feel, yet he notes that racial inequality has hurt black citizens' character, too. He writes, 'The fact that we ought to feel shame means that when we do find ourselves holding racial beliefs or disrespecting ourselves on account of our race, we betray the principles with which we identify and those represent ways of being and of comporting oneself to others and ourselves as having inherent moral worth' (p. 27). Lebron addresses the question of bad character through an elegant reading of the film *Crash*.

In part because of the clarity and optimism of Lebron's 'we' and his assumption that shame's normative effects can be felt and wielded universally, I would have liked to have seen him address shame's debilitating effects. I am not fully convinced that preoccupations with 'good character' and the experience of being told (by yourself or others) that you have failed to live up to community norms and standards has the automatic progressive and political trigger Lebron identifies. Some attention to scholars like Sara Ahmed, Sandra Bartky, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Martha Nussbaum, Michael Warner and others who have argued that people experience and act on shame differently, and that shame can traffic in identity-based inequalities and power asymmetries, would have helped flesh out the assumption that we share a common moral understanding, political framework and sense of what democracy requires. It would have been especially fruitful to engage Warner's (1999) claim that the first thing people do with their shame is 'pin it on someone else' (p. 3). Warner is describing sexual shame in this instance, yet the claim can be extended to Lebron's moral shame, as well. White liberal shame tends to respond to racial inequality with token policy changes – like welfare reform, which Lebron analyzes so keenly – that exacerbate rather than alleviate racial inequalities and asymmetries. Ahmed (2004) makes a similar point about the ways in which proclamations of national shame through the politics of apology often stand in for meaningful reparative action. These scholars' works suggest that the experience of coming to grips with a failure to live up to your values – or the experience of having others' values imputed to you – can constrain political action and radical change.

The centrality of 'we' to Lebron's argument also complicates what I see as the book's greatest contributions: the account of power and the interpretation of racial

inequality as a problem of social value. Modifying Charles Mills's account of racial power as white power, Lebron seeks to explain the mechanics of how white supremacy works, adapts and re-emerges in different contexts even as racially egalitarian (for example, Civil Rights Act of 1964) legislation moves ahead. Lebron defines power as simultaneously *historically evolved* and *socially embedded*, which is precisely why its locus and effects are so difficult to identify and counteract. 'Racial inequality is complex', he writes, 'because of its long historical lineage, its many manifestations in a wide array of social, economic, and political practices, and last, because explicit racism is not an explanation for its persistence' (p. 27). More specifically:

Historically evolved power is the phenomenon of historically patterned group dominance founded upon racism embodied in path-dependent institutions resulting in robust contemporary inequality that no longer depends on explicit racism; socially embedded power is the ability for extant racial asymmetries to affect our sense of self and others such that those better positioned tend to hold beliefs and attitudes that motivate a lack of normative concern for the systemically disadvantaged, while those worse positioned are burdened in developing a full sense of being an equal democratic self. (p. 45)

Lebron thus reads racial inequality as a *problem of social value*, defined as 'the fact that blacks do not occupy an equal place in the scheme of normative attention and concern upon which our society depends in the first place to justify the distribution of benefits and burdens, as well as to identify those who are deserving or appropriate recipients' (p. 46). This weak valuation explains the relative lack of moral courage in the face of unequal policies, and why reformers don't fully consider the impact of their work on black lives. Lebron emphasizes that there is no coordinated white supremacist agenda that locks blacks out of social, political and economic opportunities and positions of power; rather, institutions – often born from racist ideology – take on lives of their own, and then go on to cement inequalities and asymmetries, as well as the justificatory schemes that validate them. Drawing on Vesla Weaver's concept of 'frontlash', which illustrates how regressive social policies like felon disfranchisement emerge alongside civil rights victories like the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, Lebron shows how racist institutional norms replicate themselves over time. Yet doesn't this replication and 'our' assent to it undercut the claim that we already agree on questions of moral equality and would respond to shame in racially egalitarian ways?

Lebron's acute institutional analysis leaves me wondering if racial inequality is as different from the more obviously agonistic and contentious fights over abortion rights and the death penalty after all. Lebron calls for shame rather than moral outrage on the question of racial inequality because he believes that Americans already agree about what liberal democratic values require with respect to racial equality. And shame is certainly an appropriate emotion to feel in light of America's many failures



to extend its values to all citizens. Yet Lebron's powerful account of patterned racial inequality, which crystallizes in his closing discussion of George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin and becomes more salient in the wake of the murder of Michael Brown, suggests that everybody *may not* take moral equality as a starting point and will not be motivated by shame of a particular, egalitarian kind. On this point I am reminded of Charles Payne's critique of the 'moral awakening' interpretation of the civil rights movement. According to Payne (2006), victories in struggles for racial justice are earned through day-to-day organizing and hard fought, sometimes bloody activism and political pressure rather than moral change in the hearts of whites or national leaders (pp. 132–135). One of the take-away messages of Lebron's fine book is that there is plenty of room for moral outrage about racial injustice in our time. However much Lebron claims to work within the settled frame of liberal democracy and the values on which 'we' agree, *The Color of Our Shame* delivers a piercing call for political struggle of a most courageous and radical kind.

## Note

- 1 Lebron notes: 'I will refer to blacks as the persons owed racial justice, but I want to make clear that I mean "black", as an identity category, to be a bit broader than what is typically meant (that is, with reference to African Americans). ... I mean the category to be flexible enough to include, for example, dark-skinned persons of Caribbean or South American descent [because] America has inherited a tradition of social categorization that also affects our social cognition' (p. 167, n1).

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Payne, C. (2006) Debating the civil rights movement: The view from the trenches. In: S. Lawson and C. Payne (eds.) *Debating the Civil Rights Movement: 1945-1968*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 115–155.
- Warner, M. (1999) *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: Free Press.

Jill Locke  
Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, MN 56082, USA