

Blacks and Social Justice: A Quarter-Century Later

Charles W. Mills

The twenty-fifth anniversary of Bernard Boxill's 1984 *Blacks and Social Justice*¹ provides an ideal opportunity to look not merely at the book itself, a quarter-century after its initial publication, but at blacks and social justice today. I will begin by contextualizing the significance of Boxill's work in the historic setting of white philosophy, before turning to the actual text and its normative prescriptions. Finally, I will make some suggestions about the possible need to reconceptualize the relation of race and liberal theory in the light of the continuing elusiveness of the goal of racial justice.

I.

A 2009 African-American PhD in philosophy would graduate into an academic and social world seemingly far more welcoming than that of 1984. Today the American Philosophical Association (APA) is bristling with minority caucus committees of various kinds, Africana Philosophy is formally recognized as a respectable category in the discipline, numerous books on race and the black experience by white as well as black authors are being published by the top presses, the APA has recently had its first black president, Anthony Appiah, and (to move to a somewhat larger stage) the *country* now has its first black president. To be sure, a huge distance still remains to be traveled both in terms of demographic and thematic representation. The percentage of professional philosophers who are African-American is still no more than 1 percent, and until the conceptual and narrative challenge of this alternative philosophical perspective is really faced by the mainstream of the discipline, African-American philosophy is still being ghettoized. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that progress has been made by comparison with a quarter-century ago, and all credit must go to the pioneering figures—some no longer with us, some still around—who helped to make it possible.²

Bernard Boxill, who graduated in 1971, is unquestionably one of those key figures. *Blacks and Social Justice* was the third of three crucial early 1980s texts by black philosophers—following Cornel West's 1982 *Prophesy Deliverance!* and Leonard Harris's path-breaking 1983 anthology, *Philosophy Born of Struggle*³—that made it clear that black philosophy had arrived, and that the interminable 1970s debates over whether there really was a black philosophy, and what its defining features were, could finally be put to rest. A fourth book by a black philosopher,

Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class*,⁴ actually appeared in 1981, thus in a sense initiating the sequence. But although Davis's text is now seen as a classic work, one of the earliest texts on what has come to be known as "intersectionality," it is not usually categorized *as* philosophy, despite its obvious implications for the necessary rethinking of orthodox Marxism, critical theory, and white feminism. So although all these works opened up the spaces that later generations have been able to expand upon, Davis's insights for the reconceptualization of the discipline have for the most part not been taken up by philosophers.

Boxill's first presentation was given at a historic conference—the first conference on black philosophy at a "white" institution—held in 1970 at the University of Illinois at Chicago (then known as Chicago Circle). His presentation was on reparations, and it would later become his first publication. From the very start, then, Boxill has worked on issues of race and social justice, and done so from the perspective of an analytically trained philosopher (University of California at Los Angeles) operating within a mainstream liberal normative framework. So while sharing a common black liberation agenda with the aforementioned West and Harris, and others like Lucius Outlaw, Tommy Lott, and, later, Lewis Gordon, he is utilizing the Anglo-American rather than the Continental tradition, while, of course, seeking to "blacken" it and make it responsive to the distinctive concerns of African Americans.

To the outsider there might seem to be nothing remarkable about such a project. After all, what is standardly judged to be the seminal text of the Western tradition, Plato's *Republic*, is a single-minded exploration of the central topic of justice—what it is and how it should be manifested both in the polis and its inhabitants—and A. N. Whitehead famously observed that all of Western philosophy was just a series of footnotes to Plato. So how could there be a more respectable philosophical genealogy for the enterprise of adjudicating issues of racial justice? Moreover—the naïve outsider might additionally have thought—it was not just a matter of classical antiquity, the authority of ancient Greece. Whereas mainstream Anglo-American political philosophy had fallen into a boring and moribund state by the 1950s, it would soon be spectacularly revived by the 1971 publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*.⁵ Rawls's work would ultimately generate an industry producing dozens of books and thousands of articles dealing with the subject of social justice. So it might have seemed to an uninformed and nonphilosophical observer that an ideal philosophical environment had now been created for tackling racial justice issues. After all, was racial *injustice* not one of the most salient features of the United States, the only Western society, as is often pointed out, to have had large-scale plantation slavery on its soil in the modern period?⁶ What more natural, then, than that a black normative philosopher should choose this as his major theme, inspired, no doubt, by a book whose opening page tells us that: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought"⁷

But in a demographically and conceptually white discipline, where race is seen as marginal even today, this took a courage the outsider might not appreciate.

The fact that it is only now, more than three decades later, that reparations as a topic has begun to get widespread discussion outside of the black community, is an indication of how far ahead of his time Boxill was. It would have been far easier to have become a white philosopher in blackface writing about safely “universal” topics, ringing the standard changes on Kantianism or utilitarianism or natural rights theory without raising embarrassing questions about why theorists in these traditions seemed to have so little to say about the specifics of racial wrongs.

For to the extent that any normative white philosophical theory was stimulated by the civil rights movements and ghetto uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s, it was developing in an odd—although in retrospect perhaps entirely predictable—way. It was not that no literature was being produced by white philosophers, the legitimizing authority, on issues of affirmative action and preferential treatment, but that this body of work was sharply disjoined from the Rawls literature, was never remotely equal to it in volume, and, above all, tended to be *categorized* differently—as work in “applied ethics,” and thus on a lower rung of the status ladder of normative theory. In the prestige hierarchy of ethics as a philosophical subject, justice *in* (supposed) *abstracto* marked the location where the serious action was to be found and where the leading figures of the profession worked. And this high-level abstract justice, despite its ostensible colorlessness, somehow did not include racial justice.

The agenda was in fact set very early on by that same John Rawls who deserves so much credit for reviving political philosophy, although arguably the historic weight of tradition in the field and the overwhelming whiteness of the demography would have produced this outcome anyhow.⁸ Rawls declared that his focus within the area of justice was going to be on “ideal theory.” And what might initially have appeared to be an innocuous methodological stipulation—“for the most part I examine the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society . . . what a perfectly just society would be like. Thus I consider primarily what I call strict compliance as opposed to partial compliance theory”⁹—would turn out to have dramatic and long-lasting effects. For what it did was basically license the *ignoring* of racial justice not merely by Rawls himself but by his disciples and commentators. In a well-ordered society, racism would not exist, so it follows that we need not concern ourselves with the measures to address it in societies like our own, where it does exist. Distributive justice under ideal circumstances would be the focus, not compensatory rectificatory justice under nonideal circumstances. So the promise of engaging racial injustice that the nonphilosophical outsider might have assumed to be obvious was in fact illusory. In effect, the categories were so set up that a book on blacks and social justice *could not be* a book about justice. What had taken the form of a *methodological* decision was really a *substantive* commitment to the ignoring of issues of rectification; what had seemed to be a *universalist* and *colorless* choice was really a reflection of *particularist* and *white* privilege.

The results can be seen all around us today, forty years after *Theory*’s original publication, in a vast secondary literature of articles, books, and reference

works—not merely in the English-speaking world but globally, given the book’s translation into more than thirty languages,¹⁰ and not just in philosophy but in other disciplines also, given its crossover success—in which racial injustice, the distinctive injustice of the modern world, is almost completely ignored. In Samuel Freeman’s edited *Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, for example, it is not merely that not one of the fourteen chapters deals with race, but that there is not a single section or subsection of any of the chapters which does so.¹¹ Nor is race mentioned except in two passing paragraphs in a multi-authored sixty-page symposium on Rawls’s legacy in a 2006 issue of *Perspectives on Politics*, one of the official journals of the American Political Science Association.¹² Social justice, yes; racial justice, no.

Boxill’s work thus needs to be located in this context of evasion. His consistent strategy has basically been to take liberalism at its word, and ask what an apparatus of rights and freedoms can do to address the issue of the historic injustices against blacks. Coming out of the radical 1960s, there were many people dismissive of liberalism, endorsing instead some variant of Marxism or black separatism. (Post-structuralism had yet to make its theoretical debut.) But Boxill has consistently argued that if all humans do indeed have certain fundamental rights and entitlements, then the case for the remediation of racial injustice—whether in the form of affirmative action or the more radical measure of reparations—can be made straightforwardly within a liberal framework. And what would undoubtedly have seemed a “reformist” approach to many on the left at the time has basically been vindicated—at least in terms of an ideal liberal theory. Marxism and socialism have—at least for now—fallen by the historical wayside; black separatism is hardly credible today; post-structuralism may be able to deconstruct but it has problems in positively reconstructing. So if liberalism is not the only game in town, it is at least the main game in town, the now hegemonic ideology of the modern world, and people of color arguably need to articulate their demands within this framework.¹³

What Boxill has demonstrated is how mistaken it is to write off liberalism on the basis of its actual racist history as an inappropriate normative vehicle for developing an antiracist agenda. Indeed, it is noteworthy that what many commentators see as the most exciting recent development in the black liberation struggle—the reparations movement—is being advanced for the most part in a liberal ethico-juridical framework. As Martha Biondi writes in the opening sentence of a recent article: “Reparations—for the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, sexual slavery, genocide, colonialism, apartheid, disfranchisement, and the multiple other forms of racial discrimination and exploitation—has surged to the forefront of antiracist advocacy in the black world, particularly in the United States,” and its key moral principle “define[s] national racisms as a violation of international human rights protocols.”¹⁴ Boxill’s work is fully in this tradition, and as such has for many decades been a touchstone for other black philosophers engaged in a similar enterprise, like Bill Lawson, Howard McGary, and, more recently, Tommie Shelby. Even today, a quarter-century later, few if any books in

this area can match the close reading and detailed dialogical engagement with central figures in the field offered by the text. Whether or not one agrees with his position, his work is always exemplarily lucid, full of intricate arguments, rebuttals, and counter-arguments, completely antidogmatic, dialectical in the classical sense of the term, and so invariably profitable for the interested reader to engage with.

II.

Let me now turn from generalities to the specifics of *Blacks and Social Justice*. The original book had ten chapters, addressing the following subjects: color-blindness; black progress and the free market; Marxism, justice, and black progress; busing; affirmative action; separation or assimilation; black self-respect; and civil disobedience. The revised 1992 edition added an eleventh chapter, "The Surrender to Injustice," on William Julius Wilson, Glenn Loury, and Shelby Steele.

The natural first question is: to what extent is the book now dated and to what extent is the book still relevant? A book focused on topical issues may become dated because the problems it is addressing no longer exist, and one may think of one's work (self-deludedly or not) as perhaps even having made a small contribution to this happy resolution. Sadly, to the extent that Boxill's book is dated, it is not at all because the problems no longer exist but because the attempted solutions have largely been abandoned and are no longer even being considered.

For example, Boxill has no less than three chapters on busing (seventy-four pages, more than a quarter of the book), which is no longer an issue not because residential areas and schools are now integrated but—on the contrary—because the extent of segregation is now so great, and the backlash against busing so hostile, that it has essentially been terminated. That does not mean that the arguments he deploys and the analyses he utilizes may not continue to have enduring value, to be applied perhaps in other contexts, but the issue itself is basically a dead one. As various commentators, such as Jonathan Kozol and Gary Orfield, have pointed out, the educational system today is more segregated than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, which were actually the high point of partial desegregation. In fact in many parts of the country resegregation is now—more than fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*—approaching or exceeding the levels of the 1950s. As Kozol writes about contemporary "apartheid schooling": "In Chicago, by the academic year 2000–2001, 87 percent of public school enrollment was black or Hispanic; less than 10 percent of children in the schools were white. In Washington, DC, 94 percent of children were black or Hispanic; less than 5 percent were white . . . A teacher at P.S. 65, one of the South Bronx elementary schools I've visited repeatedly, once pointed out to me one of the two white children I had ever seen there . . . 'I've been at this school for 18 years,' she said. 'This is the first white student I have ever taught.'"¹⁵ Affirmative action, the subject of another chapter, is also virtually dead, with ever higher standards of

“strict scrutiny” being invoked. Boxill was dubious a quarter-century ago that civil disobedience would be likely to have much success in protesting *de facto* as against *de jure* white domination, and obviously the improbability of such an outcome is even greater today, in the Age of Obama.

Marxism as a topic might seem to be equally if not more dead. On the one hand, except for the “red decade” of the 1930s, and (in a different way) for part of the 1960s–1970s, Marxism has always been a marginal political presence in the United States, and the late 1960s/1970s black radical flirtation with Marxism was largely over by the time Boxill was writing, let alone now, in the current post-1989–1991 period after the collapse of “actually existing socialism.” In Michael Dawson’s summary, in his overview of African-American political ideologies, “black Marxists have been generally unwilling to label themselves Marxists since the late 1980s, the defeat of the Soviet Union, and the shattering of the black radical movement during the 1970s and the early 1980s . . . Today, black Marxism is not a mass force.”¹⁶ On the other hand, who could have envisaged a more thorough delegitimation of unregulated capitalism than the recent financial melt-down and global crisis, which more than one commentator has suggested could be likened to the giant Ponzi scheme of Bernie Madoff on a somewhat larger scale? So maybe Marxism should not be counted out just yet, and the relation of left theory to race will once again become an issue of interest. I will return to this below.

What about his main intellectual opponents? The key people are all still around, and active, although in some cases their positions have shifted. Thomas Sowell is still at the Hoover Institution turning out a book a year, if not more. William Julius Wilson continues to be a major figure, although perhaps, with the end of the Clinton Administration, less of a national player than he used to be. Shelby Steele has now joined Sowell at the Hoover Institution, and continues to warn of the dangers of affirmative action and the exploitation of white guilt. By contrast, Glenn Loury, interestingly, has moved leftwards, apparently disillusioned by his fellow white conservatives’ embrace of Dinesh D’Souza’s *The End of Racism*¹⁷ (a book refuting its own title). Loury has also written an important work, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, that got a lot of attention, and which argues strongly *against* the position that “public agents should be ‘colorblind.’”¹⁸ So Loury is no longer clearly, or at all, in the adversarial category, and Boxill’s views on Wilson might also need some modification.

But apart from these changes, intellectual and social, we have also, of course, witnessed a national change with huge symbolic significance: the unprecedented ascension of an African American to the Presidency of the United States. Since the beginning of the republic, generations of black activists agitating for racial equality and justice have had to deal with their government either as an overt enemy—“The Negroes are in the position of having to fight their own Government,” complained black trade union leader A. Philip Randolph in 1943¹⁹—or at best, a vacillating and inconsistent friend. Now, the White House will at least in certain respects be black. What will the implications be for the struggle for racial justice,

for turning the symbolic into the substantive, especially in a context where that same ascension of a black man to the Presidency is not seen by most whites as a victory in the *ongoing* struggle for racial justice but rather as the final proof that that struggle has long since *succeeded*?

In what follows, I am going to focus on the three linked topics of color-blindness, Marxism and race, and white moral psychology. What I will argue is that Boxill's treatment would be theoretically enriched and complemented by locating his normative liberal account in an alternative nonliberal descriptive/explanatory social framework that would explain the seeming intransigence of white opposition to racial justice. Biondi in her above-cited essay suggests that "The philosophical and tactical brilliance of reparations lies in its synthesis of moral principles and political economy."²⁰ I think such a "synthesis" is just what we need to understand why supposedly liberal principles have historically been, and continue to be, so often breached by white liberals. It is not a matter of rejecting moral suasion and the appeal to justice for amoral *realpolitik*, but of recognizing in a clear-eyed way the limited force of such appeals, given a social ontology of modernity radically different from that presupposed (at least officially) by classic liberalism. It is, in sum, a matter of recognizing, in all its far-flung ramifications, *the political economy of white supremacy*. Insofar as Obama calculatedly stayed away from a racial justice platform during the electoral campaign, insofar as he has already given signals of distancing himself from a progressive agenda, it will become more than ever before important to understand the *structural* nature of race in the United States, which is not going to be eliminated by having a black man with mass white support as the Chief Executive, especially if that support is contingent precisely upon not raising certain issues.

III.

1. *Color-Blindness*

Color-blindness is dealt with in Boxill's first chapter, which is also unfortunately his shortest chapter, a mere ten pages. I say this is unfortunate because color-blindness is arguably the ideological key to the shift of recent decades legitimating the end of measures to deal with racial injustice. Our new Chief Justice John Roberts's 2007 decision in the *Seattle* and *Louisville* cases (where school boards were using race as a factor to promote diversity) sums up the position with wonderful epigrammatic brevity: "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race."²¹ That Roberts could say this with apparent sincerity and a straight face is a stunning testimony to the long-term success of the strategy of framing the debate in individualist terms that erase race as social structure. The myriad manifold differences between Jim Crow segregation and discrimination and the remedial measures intended to *combat* the legacy of Jim Crow segregation and discrimination are denied. Indeed the two are *equated*, and not even by argument but by the representation of the

claim as a simple tautology, an analytic statement of the classic Aristotelian form “A is A,” which only someone blind to the elementary prerequisites of rational discourse could fail to appreciate.

Boxill’s recognition of the historic importance of the color-blindness principle is, of course, indicated by his locating the discussion in his opening chapter, and his insistence that at least some “color-conscious” policies are morally justified: “My object in this chapter is to demonstrate that the color-blind principle, which considers all color-conscious policies to be invalid, is mistaken” (11). But it is noteworthy that neither of the two main arguments for color-blindness upon which he focuses—“that it is wicked, unfair, and unreasonable to penalize a person for what he cannot help being” (11) and that people should “be treated differently in ways which profoundly affect their lives only on the basis of features for which they are responsible” (13)—captures, to my mind, the main contemporary version of the principle. The crucial premise of the contemporary version, in my opinion, is its denial of the differential positioning of blacks and whites in a system of structural handicap and advantage, along, of course, with the denial of the existence of that system itself. In other words—and this is the link with political economy, to be explored in greater depth in the next section—it presupposes a world of transactions among symmetrically located individuals, just as the classic liberalism Marx criticized presupposed a “free exchange” between workers and capitalists. In his introduction to his recent coedited anthology on whiteness, *White Out*, Woody Doane summarizes the present situation:

Color-blind racial ideology has combined with the transparency [i.e., invisible rather than seen] of white identity and white privilege to create a new set of racial understandings for white Americans. Within this new racial discourse, race no longer “matters”—except perhaps as a private or symbolic identity . . . vaguely linked to “culture” in a “color-blind” society. In this “color-blind” society, the prescription for dealing with racial issues is not to “see” race and to claim that “everyone is the same”. . . I contend that “color-blind” ideology plays an important role in the maintenance of white hegemony. As an organized set of claims about race, “color blindness” rests on the seemingly unassailable moral foundation of “equality,” which is the basis for its political strength. What is overlooked—or deliberately masked—is the persistence of racial stratification and the ongoing role of social institutions in reproducing social inequality . . . Within the discourse of “color blindness,” inequality is explained away as the result of individual or communal failings, not the persistence of racism, and is therefore not considered a problem requiring structural change.²²

So for theorists like Doane and others, color-blindness is now ideologically central to the reproduction of the present racial order. Indeed some radical sociologists, such as his coeditor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, actually speak about “color-blind racism,” and identify “abstract liberalism” as one of its “central frames”: “When minorities were slaves, contract laborers, or ‘*braceros*,’ the principles of liberalism and humanism were not extended to them. Today whites believe minorities are part of the body-politic but extend the ideas associated with liberalism in an *abstract and decontextualized* manner” that, by denying the historic differences in

the situation of whites and people of color, precludes the rectificatory measures that would be required to bring about genuine equality between them.²³

What I am suggesting, then, is that it is not enough (although it is certainly necessary) to challenge, using liberal norms and values, the injustice of discrimination against blacks. We also need to challenge the liberal social ontology that facilitates the equating of invidious racial discrimination and corrective race-based measures to remedy that discrimination, an ontology that mystifies the realities of racial domination by denying race's centrality to the modern world, its fundamental shaping effect on (to use Rawlsian language) "the basic structure," and the people who, in different locations, inhabit that structure. We need to recognize that in a United States where whites can "prove" their antiracism by pointing to the black President they just voted for, unfair racial disadvantage will need to be conceptualized in terms much broader than being the victim of overt racism. "Color-blindness," especially in its present incarnation, is key to this mystification and obfuscation of social reality, and needs to be identified and criticized as such. For what it really expresses is a willed blindness to, a refusal to see, the enduring structures of white privilege, in terms of income, wealth, educational opportunity, residential advantage, likelihood of imprisonment, differential life-expectancy, and numerous other factors.

2. *The Political Economy of Race*

That brings me to chapter 3, on "Marxism, Justice, and Black Progress." The twentieth century story of "blacks and reds" is an immensely complicated one, obviously far too long to go into here. But the essential point is that Marxism—being for many decades the seemingly most powerful body of oppositional theory within the Western tradition, offering the seemingly most radical critique of the existing order—has always attracted a significant fraction of black intellectuals and political activists, some joining white Marxist organizations (e.g., the American Communist Party in the 1930s), some establishing their own organizations (e.g., the various Marxist/Marxist-Leninist/Maoist black revolutionary groups of the 1960s–1970s). In his classic text *Black Marxism*,²⁴ Cedric Robinson famously argues that the problematic history of Africana diasporic intellectuals and activists with the white left is more than a matter of the shortcomings or actual racism of particular individuals or parties. Rather, it testifies to the deep structural divergence between white Western Marxism and the black radical tradition, a tradition that grows organically out of the experience of racial subordination in the West. Accordingly, even though many African Americans even today still insist on the continuing importance of Marxist theory, it must be in a version theoretically modified to accommodate the realities of race.

Boxill's dubiousness about Marxism in this chapter, with respect to its normative claims, its theoretical analysis of capitalism and race, and its political prescriptions, may thus seem to be completely historically vindicated. But I want

to suggest that something of value can still be extracted from the Marxist tradition, even if socialism as a universal panacea is no longer (if it ever was) a likelihood. What (a non-class-reductionist) Marxism can help us to construct is a political economy of race.

Historically, the white male left has tended to be class-reductionist in their analyses, not attributing appropriate significance to other social divisions. This was why, for example, so many women activists who had gotten involved in Marxist groups in the “revolutionary” 1960s and 1970s would eventually leave them, seeking new theoretical frameworks (“patriarchy”) to account for continuing sexism in self-proclaimed vanguardist organizations. Similarly, as just mentioned, many people of color who joined white left parties would conclude from their experiences that white Marxism failed to apprehend the centrality of race to the making of the modern world, and that not just Marxist empirical claims but fundamental Marxist categories themselves needed to be rethought. Typically, racism has been seen as a particular variant of bourgeois ideology, imposed on white workers by the ruling class against their “real” interests. So in terms of the famous base (material)/superstructure (ideal) model of society, the material class interests of white workers were potentially mobilizable against racism and class domination.

But suppose—as many black left activists argued over the twentieth century (including Du Bois in at least some incarnations)—race was not merely ideal but material, located in the base itself? Suppose racial domination was so deep-rooted and pervasive that it needed to be theoretically recognized and analyzed as a system of its own? Suppose white racism was not merely the (top-down) ideology of the ruling class of a capitalist system but the (top-down and bottom-up) ideology of whites *as a group* in a white-supremacist system? It would then mean that white workers’ group interests included white racial interests as well as class interests, so that—following the same orthodox base/superstructure causal story—we would expect that white racism might be *held in place* rather than undermined by material causality. And that would obviously be a far less sanguine picture in terms of political prognoses for the future. For it would imply that *conflicting* material interests (of both race and class) rather than *unequivocally antiracist* material interests (of class alone) were the actual dynamo, and that a vested white group interest in perpetuating the existing social order did and does exist.

Now Boxill would, I am sure, be alarmed to hear himself characterized as a Marxist. But what I am suggesting is that many of his comments and criticisms in this chapter point to a picture that—although it is certainly incompatible with orthodox (“white”) Marxism—is arguably in keeping, at the foundational level of the theory, with a general political economy approach, one that recognizes group domination and material group interests as fundamental to determining how society really works. In other words, the consistent application of race-conscious Marxist principles might well take us to a Marxism beyond and contra Marx himself. Boxill argues, for example, following Du Bois, that white workers have

a vested interest in excluding lower-paid black workers from the market; he suggests, following Fanon, that insofar as the First World proletariat supported Third World colonial liberation it was primarily because of reluctance to die in colonial wars rather than internationalist solidarity; he proposes that even if Marxists are right that capitalism created racism, there is no reason to expect that racism will wane as economic conditions change, and good reason to expect that white workers' group interests might well cause it to increase; and that in general it is illuminating to conceptualize white workers and white capitalists as part of (in Lester Thurow's phrase) a "white monopolistic cartel" rather than in necessary opposition to one another (55–60). All of these claims, I would contend, are accommodatable within a revisionist political economy that takes race and white privilege seriously rather than seeing them as epiphenomenal to class.

At the time *Blacks and Social Justice* came out, the 1990s' explosion of work on "whiteness" had yet to occur. Today, of course, there is a huge body of literature analyzing the multifold ways in which whiteness and white privilege shape people. One of the key texts in initiating this body of work was David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, which argued (adapting for its title a phrase from Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*) that the white working class actively made themselves as white—they were not just passive recipients of an ideology from above—and that whiteness paid off in numerous ways, material and otherwise.²⁵ Boxill criticizes the Marxist economist Michael Reich for "deny[ing] the existence of a substantial class of white workers who profit from racism" (57). But today his case would have been far easier to make, given the vast increase in methodological sophistication in analyzing patterns of racial inequality ushered in by Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro's 1995 *Black Wealth/White Wealth*.²⁶ Oliver and Shapiro's book made the conceptual breakthrough of arguing that differentials in *wealth* are far more important than differentials in income in determining the long-term prospects for racial equality, and that differentials in wealth are far greater than income differentials. The most recent figures (from 2004) are as follows: differentials in net worth between the median white household and the median black household—ten to one; differentials in financial wealth (liquid and semi-liquid assets, including mutual funds) between the median white household and the median black household—more than a *hundred* to one.²⁷ Medians are the statistical tool of choice in these areas because, of course, they are more revealing than averages, less susceptible to being biased by the megamillions of the tiny minority at the top. But critics might still contend that they are going to be skewed by white middle-class wealth, and that the white working class does not actually benefit from white supremacy. So here, finally, are the figures on the comparative net worth of the bottom quintiles of median white and median black families (in other words the white and black working class): whites, \$24,000; blacks, \$57—a ratio greater than 400:1.²⁸

We can see, then, how misleading the orthodox white Marxist analysis of capitalism *in abstracto* (the left equivalent—abstract classes—of liberalism's misleadingly abstract individuals) has always been when applied to the United

States (but not just the United States). If the general thesis of materialism is true—that people tend to be differentially motivated by their group interests—then we would expect that this huge differential would itself tend to shape white group behavior. In other words, the orthodox Marxist taxonomy would have to be revised to take account of white supremacy as a system overlapping capitalism, and of white group interests as a “material” factor in their own right. Boxill writes: “Even the more imaginative analyses of the race-class issue in America cannot avoid the conclusion that the problem of racism requires a revision of Marxist theory” (66). What I am suggesting to him is that ironically, in a deeper sense, historical materialism (if not “Marxism”) would have been vindicated rather than refuted by such a revision. It is not that the white working class are acting in an un-materialist way in holding on to their racism—such an analysis would only seem plausible if one ignored the payoffs of whiteness. Once these are added to the equation, once race is conceptualized not merely as an ideology but a system of privilege in its own right, then materialism itself would lead us to predict white working-class resistance to dismantling the racial structuring of the economy. Racial capitalism does not follow the same logic of development as nonracial capitalism, and this will have ramifications in all social spheres.

3. *Racial Justice and White Moral Psychology*

And that brings us finally to the questions of moral prescription and political recommendation that political economy in the classic left tradition also raises: what is right and what is wrong in the social structure, and what should be done about what is wrong? What lessons does political economy teach us about capitalism as a historic formation, and what if any are the differences introduced once we start conceptualizing it—more accurately, as I have claimed—as racial/white-supremacist capitalism? These questions could be said to be both ethical and meta-ethical, on the one hand normative issues of justice, on the other hand second-level issues of the appropriateness or not of applying such categories, the nature of and role played by the moral psychology of people in different class/race locations, and the likely causal efficaciousness of moral suasion in bringing about radical social change.

An extensive philosophical literature in the 1970s and 1980s (“extensive” by comparison with what had preceded and would succeed it, anyway) was dedicated to the question of establishing whether Marxism had a normative theory or whether all morality was just “ideology”; whether, if it did have a normative theory, what its axiology was; and what this implied for the moral assessment of capitalism. One influential position was that Marx did not actually think capitalism was unjust, since *justice* as a juridical concept was part of the “superstructure” of capitalism, and so mode-of-production relative. Correspondingly, the argument went, the appropriate Marxist way to think of communism was not as an ideally just classless order, but rather as a society “beyond” justice. Moral appeal in the class struggle to rights, freedoms, and entitlements was therefore mistaken, and

the central Marxist concept of *exploitation* was not intended to be taken normatively but “scientifically.” Boxill discusses this position and finds it dubious, arguing that “Marxist theory does not imply that capitalism is, or can be, just” (54), that Marx’s seeming comments to the contrary can be interpreted as irony or depictions of capitalist self-representation, and that moral appeals to “the ideas of rights and justice, far from being counterrevolutionary, are very revolutionary indeed” (70). Again, this is a diagnosis that has obviously historically been vindicated, both by the anti-Communist 1989–1991 revolutions (where the masses made it clear that they did not at all think that rights and justice had been “transcended”), and by the new emphasis in post-1991 left theory (to the extent that any remains) on the importance of normative argumentation. And if this argument goes through even for orthodox Marxism, it should go through *a fortiori* for the revisionist Marxism I am suggesting, since unlike (supposedly) abstract “capitalism,” white-supremacist capitalism is clearly wrong by mainstream liberal bourgeois standards.

But will it be perceived as such? What a plausible political economy approach to morality teaches us is, I propose, the following basic truths: (i) the orientation of ethical theory should be naturalized rather than idealized, recognizing the profound shaping of moral agents by the social order; (ii) this shaping will generally be conservative, to accept rather than reject the existing order, although there will be oppositional tendencies of differing strengths in various social locations; (iii) people’s perception of their group interests will play a major role in determining the likelihood or not of radical social change; and (iv) any politically transformative project hoping to be successful thus needs to recognize and try to mobilize such interests in its favor.

Note that none of the foregoing claims implies (as Marxism is often taken to imply, or to overtly proclaim) moral relativism or nihilism. The causal and the meta-ethical need to be separated: asserting that social forces generally determine what the right is judged to be is not the same as asserting that social forces determine what is right. But the truth (in my opinion) of the former claim means that moral appeals for racial justice that do not link up in a positive way with white perceptions of their group interests (whether whites as a group, or working-class whites) are going to be very limited in their efficaciousness. Moreover, many whites are going to take—are already taking—the fact of Obama’s election as the final stake in the heart of the moribund case for affirmative action, let alone any more radical rectificatory policy such as reparations. How can you (we) be talking about white racial domination when the Chief Executive is a black guy?

I think, then, that those of us still working on normative theory linked to race must face the fact that we are entering a new phase in the country’s history in which the already very difficult struggle to get a sympathetic white hearing for these issues is going to become even harder. The perception is going to be that in a time when everybody is suffering from the economic crisis, it would be particularly unfair to single out blacks for (supposedly) special treatment. So the strategy of William Julius Wilson (of “concealing” a black-friendly “hidden”

agenda in “universal” programs) that Boxill discussed extensively and very critically in his final chapter 11 (“The Surrender to Injustice”) is likely to resurface as an issue, especially given the widespread calls for a “New” New Deal that would emulate Franklin Roosevelt’s success in putting the country back to work. (More than one magazine has projected Obama on to the famous open-car picture of Roosevelt.)

Boxill’s judgment on Wilson is harsh: “[Egoism as an explanation] is also behind his ‘hidden agenda.’ If people are essentially money-makers and have no morals or other convictions, they certainly cannot have or be moved by a sense of justice. Justice must therefore be secured by the subterfuge of the ‘hidden agenda’” (245). But to begin with, social scientists who work on race would argue that it is collective rather than individual interests that are the crucial determinants of this resistance. In their now-classic *Divided by Color*, for example, Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders conclude that “In matters of public opinion [on race], citizens seem to be asking themselves less ‘What’s in it for me?’ and more ‘What’s in it for my group?’”²⁹ So it is not a matter of egoism but of group psychology. And secondly, the problem is precisely that most whites *do* think of themselves as upholding ideals of justice, fairness, and antidiscrimination when they defend such positions. That’s a central part of what “color-blindness” involves.³⁰

The question for Boxill, then, is whether he still stands by this judgment in the new period we are entering, especially given the combination of economic crisis and the diminished salience of racism. What are the criteria by which we should distinguish principled and unprincipled approaches to the ongoing problem of redressing racial injustice in the United States? Is it the case that any policy that tries to take into account white moral psychology and white perception of their group interests is basically pandering to injustice? Is it really illegitimate to include the greater or lesser likelihood of white resistance as a sociopolitical factor when deciding among the different merits of competing ideological and political strategies? Or is this a perfectly reasonable approach—indeed, more strongly, one that it would be completely unreasonable *not* to take—given the long history and bitter black experience of several hundred years of ongoing white opposition to implementing full racial justice?

It is a measure of the continuing relevance of Bernard Boxill’s work that these questions remain very live for us today, a quarter-century after the original publication of *Blacks and Social Justice*.

Notes

¹ Bernard R. Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); orig. ed. 1984. All page references to this book will be incorporated into the main text.

² Lucius Outlaw provides a valuable account of this history in his “What is Africana Philosophy?” in *Philosophy in Multiple Voices*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 109–43.

- ³Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); Leonard Harris, ed., *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983).
- ⁴Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).
- ⁵John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
- ⁶The qualification is necessary because—though its image as the terminus of the Underground Railroad tends to erase the fact—Canada also had African slavery on its soil, though on a much smaller scale.
- ⁷Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 3.
- ⁸Rodney C. Roberts has argued that there is a longstanding pattern in Western philosophy of paying “relatively little attention to questions of injustice and its rectification,” thereby favoring the perspective of the privileged, since “the concerns of victims of injustice . . . have little place in our deliberations about justice.” Introduction to Roberts, ed., *Injustice and Rectification* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 1.
- ⁹Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 8.
- ¹⁰Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (New York: Routledge, 2007), x.
- ¹¹Freeman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- ¹²Brooke Ackerley et al., “Symposium: John Rawls and the Study of Justice: Legacies of Inquiry,” *Perspectives on Politics* 4, no. 1 (2006): 75–133.
- ¹³I mean, of course, “liberalism” in the broad sense—the anti-feudal, anti-absolutist ideology of moral egalitarianism and individual rights that develops in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—not right-wing “neo-liberalism.”
- ¹⁴Martha Biondi, “The Rise of the Reparations Movement,” in *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: On Reparations for Slavery, Jim Crow, and Their Legacies*, ed. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 255, 258.
- ¹⁵Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown, 2005), 8–9. See also Gary Orfield and Susan E. Eaton, *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: The New Press, 1997) and John Charles Boger and Gary Orfield, ed., *School Resegregation: Must the South Turn Back?* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
- ¹⁶Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 231, 236.
- ¹⁷Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: The New Press, 1995).
- ¹⁸Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- ¹⁹Cited in Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal: African Americans and the U.S. Federal Government*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.
- ²⁰Biondi, “Reparations Movement,” 255.
- ²¹“Justices, 5–4, Limit Use of Race for School Integration Plan,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2007, A1.
- ²²Woody Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley “Woody” Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13.
- ²³Bonilla-Silva, “‘New Racism,’ Color-Blind Racism, and the Future of Whiteness in America,” in Doane and Bonilla-Silva, *White Out*, 275–76.
- ²⁴Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
- ²⁵David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1999), orig. ed. 1991; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [1935]).
- ²⁶Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*, tenth anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006); orig. ed. 1995.

²⁷Lawrence R. Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America, 2006/2007* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2006), 258–59. The more recent 2009 edition of this book also cites the 2004 figures as the latest available.

²⁸Linda Faye Williams, “The Issue of Our Time: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 684.

²⁹Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 264.

³⁰See, for example, Michael K. Brown et al., *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).