

Book Reviews

Charles W. Mills

The Racial Contract

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997

183 pp.

Hbk., \$19.95

The Racial Contract is a tightly written essay that brings radical philosophy to bear upon the study of whiteness, contributing to the growing body of literature that exposes the invisibility of dominant-group identities in general, and whiteness in particular, in both historical (e.g., Saxton 1990) and contemporary studies (e.g., Frankenburg 1993). Mills's contribution is to debunk the "social contract" of classical philosophy as a scheme to systematically exclude nonwhites, and lay the basis for a "racial polity." *The Racial Contract* is the ideological counterpart to white supremacy, defined more broadly as "the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years" (1).

Mills argues that "race" is socially constructed and yet materially very real. Most academic philosophy shuns this reality, and Mills offers a correction: the "recognition that racism...is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure" (3). To show that race is foundational instead of merely an overlaid justification, Mills argues that for the contractarian philosophers, and especially Kant, the racial exclusiveness of the social contract they wrought was essential to its definition, and more explicit than most acknowledge. In the case of Kant, Mills argues that "modern moral theory and modern racial theory have the same father" (71). Kant's ordering of humanity was unselfconsciously premised on both morality and race, with the assumption that the two were linked. When modern political actors subsequently put the social contract into practice, "the polity was in fact a racial one, a white-supremacist state, for which differential white racial entitlement and nonwhite racial subordination were defining" (57). The inequality of the system was ensconced in the moral conceptions of the rulers, and reinforced by allegiance to the moral code of the *Racial Contract*.

For Mills, the "basic opposition" in the world system is between whites and nonwhites. The historical and contemporary

rule of a “transnational white polity, a virtual community” of white powers has been occasionally interrupted by “internal conflict” such as the world wars (29), but these are passing exceptions to the organizing principle. For a short polemical book this story is nevertheless too simple. One may imagine a “common identity based on the transcontinental exploitation of the non-European world” (35) after the fact, but such an alignment is not clearly in evidence in history, beyond the machinations of a tiny group of rulers.

This historical version culminates in a world “essentially dominated by white capital” (36). But Mills does little to argue against at least one reasonable counter-explanation, that the world is “essentially dominated” by *capital*—whose defenders employ a cultural, ideological, and political network of social structures largely based on racialized nationalities and citizenship. The concepts of nationality and citizenship deserve more attention given what Mills refers to as the “civic and political responsibilities of Whiteness” and the “duties as citizens” of the Racial Contract (14). The American history of new ethnicities becoming “white,” for example, is indeed evidence of the social construction of race, but the rituals of patriotism involved in that process reveal a racialized national system rather than a racial structure alone.

Japan is an obvious problem for Mills, but he argues that it is the exception that proves the rule. The world really is under “economic, political, and cultural domination...by Europeans and their descendants” (31), and the difficulty with incorporating Japan culturally—the racism in World War II, for example—merely underscores this fact. On the other hand, Mills also suggests that “whiteness” need not apply to only Europeans and their descendants. That is, there may be “whites” and “Whites,” and in the future we should apply the capitalized term to whoever rules by racialized order. Thus, “Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations” (127). Here the book emerges more as a provocative tool for thinking about the interplay of ideology, race, and power than as an historical or economic argument.

For example, those who take political economy seriously will be disappointed to read that “the expropriation contract, the slavery contract, the colonial contract,” are all really just “subsidiary contracts” to the Racial Contract in its *de jure* phase (24). The important differences between these modes of production and social organization are lost. While he is correct to point out that white domination has had *de jure* and *de facto* phases, a greater level of granularity is needed to represent the processes of change that facilitated this development.

Mills is correct that the conflict between First and Third worlds has often taken precedence over inter-imperialist conflict—

and in a hidden way that mirrors the invisibility of the Racial Contract. This is not, however, proof that this structure is principally *racial*. When Mills concludes that "the different battles around the world against slavery, colonialism, jim crow, the 'color bar,' European imperialism, [and] apartheid were in a sense all part of a common struggle against the Racial Contract" (116), he takes the existence of imperialism and its opponents to be evidence for race as the foundation of the world system.

From Reich's (1981) economic question of who benefits from racism to Roediger's (1991) story of how white workers helped construct the racial order, the question of agency has been a daunting one for scholars of whiteness and racial inequality. "In a sense," Mills suggests, "the Racial Contract constructs its signatories as much as they construct it" (78). However, in this account the Contract is an actor itself, and its subjects play a relatively minor role.

Mills believes that "the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an epistemology of ignorance...producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (18). The confusion about who is acting here is clear. If on the one hand there is pervasive "white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self deception on matters related to race," but on the other hand this is "in no way *accidental*, but *prescribed* by the terms of the Racial Contract" (19), then who is doing the prescribing? "The Racial Contract is calculatedly aimed at economic exploitation," he adds, and "the bottom line is material advantage" (32-33). But if whites are ignorant of the mechanisms at work, then the Contract itself becomes the actor—the one doing the materialist calculations—and the idea has become reified. There are thorny theoretical and empirical questions here, and Mills should not be faulted for failing to resolve them, but the issue deserves more adequate consideration.

Mills wants to upend the philosophical tradition—which includes the contractarian Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant no less than the anticontractarian Hume, Mill, and Hegel—in which race is "orthogonal" to theory, "the common assumption they can all take for granted" (94). It is in this mission that *The Racial Contract* is most successful.

In the *Manifesto*, Marx argued that by "individual" the defenders of individual property meant "bourgeois," because the bourgeois were the only ones with any property to speak of. Thus, the false universalism of the modern rulers was exposed. This critique has expanded powerfully. Feminists may equally say, "by *person* you really mean *man*," and anti-colonialists have offered: "by *citizen* you really mean *mother-country*." Mills would have "we the people" exposed as "we the *white* people," and he goes to the philosophical source of the social contract to make his claim. Mills

succeeds in elevating the racial component of the social contract's false promise, and he backs off from an explicit attempt to demonstrate that race should be considered principal— except in the observation that “historically, white racial solidarity *has* overridden class and gender solidarity” (138). Left undone is the task of successfully integrating these systems, an imperative for theoretical and empirical research as well as political practice. *The Racial Contract* does not take up that task, but its contribution will be useful to those who do.

REFERENCES

- Frankenburg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Reich, Michael. 1981. *Racial Inequality: A Political-Economic Analysis*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Roediger, David. 1991. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso.
- Saxton, Alexander. 1990. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. London: Verso.

Philip N. Cohen
Department of Sociology
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

Staughton Lynd
Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's
Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement
Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997
281 pp.
Pbk., \$15.95

Staughton Lynd, a North American activist, lawyer, historian, and academic, opens his latest collection of essays with a quote from Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal Dreams*. It is worth repeating because it captures, as a good quote should, the essence of the book: