<CHN>5

MILLS ON CLASS IN RELATION TO RACE

Charles Mills began his career as a Marxist but at a particular point shifted to a focus on race, deliberately leaving behind an explicit concern with class, though implying that both class and race (along with gender) constitute distinct, though interacting, domination systems in society. Blum argues that Mills's permanent contribution to political theory is to see white supremacy as a sociopolitical order with its own character and logic, but that his account of race and white supremacy is faulty because class processes are internal to the racial domination system and "racial injustice" already incorporates some aspects of class injustice. Blum argues that this is not to reduce race to class, as Mills was correct in criticizing Marxism for (sometimes) doing. Some aspects of race do not concern class, though others do. Mills's failure to recognize and articulate class as a pervasive domination system (despite implying that it is one) is a source of his failure to recognize the class aspects of race, and, for example, to recognize that white supremacy can fail to benefit and indeed positively harm some white people. Mills also fails to consistently articulate the specific normative character of contemporary racial injustice, misleadingly conflating it with the "subperson" view of Black people dominant in the "classic" colonial, slavery, and Segregation periods of white supremacy.

White Supremacy as a System

Charles W. Mills made at least two great and permanent contributions to political theory and philosophy. One was to promote the recognition of "racial justice" as a fundamental form of social justice, so theorizing about social justice must take account of racial justice as a central concern. The second was to establish that a system of race-based injustice has reigned inside most countries in the West, and the globe more generally, for several centuries. This system, which he plausibly calls "white supremacy," has deeply shaped the modern world, and philosophers must pay attention to it. The sources of white unjust advantage are built into the characteristic ways national and international institutions function. Mills also argues, and I think establishes, that although race as a social phenomenon came to exist as a largely after-the-fact rationalization of economic exploitation and domination, once on the scene, its subsequent manifestations, including in the present, can no longer be understood fully in class terms (2003, xvi; 2017a, 7–8). To say that race cannot be reduced to class is not the same as denying the possibility of a Marxist account of race, since the resources of Marxism go beyond centering class. Indeed, Mills regards himself as offering a "materialist" account of race, in what he argues to be the Marxist sense of this concept—one that includes the aspiration to explain society-wide structural oppression.

In addition to white supremacy, Mills recognizes other comparable overarching systems of domination and advantage as features of our world, the most prominent being gender and class (2003, 182). Mills's understanding of white supremacy is "intersectional" in the sense that he sees it as interacting with these other systems, and they with each other. Individual persons' life situations can be fully understood only in relation to the interactions of all the relevant domination systems. Nevertheless, Mills (explicitly borrowing an insight from feminist political theory) comes to treat white supremacy as a relatively autonomous system in its own right rather than an abstraction from, for example, class (181). For Mills, white supremacy is a system in itself—one that has radically shaped the modern world.

I will be critical of various aspects of Mills's writings but want to affirm and honor the permanent value of his work for political philosophy. He will be remembered as one of the great philosophers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and I am deeply grateful and

fortunate to have known him and to have lived when he did. Although Mills does sometimes explicitly recognize class as fully analogous to race and gender as a domination/advantage system, I will argue that, once he stopped explicitly writing as a Marxist and turned his attention to race, on the whole his writings do *not* portray class as a system of domination and advantage analogous to race (and gender). Several times in the last 23 or so years of his life, Mills explicitly states that he is no longer trying to provide an account of class as an overall domination system (2003, xvi–xvii). In "Intersectional Meditations: A Reply to Kathryn Gines and Shannon Sullivan," Mills explains that it was coming to the United States that affected his understanding of the relation between race and class (2017b, 42). This shift occurred due to the historical evidence of white supremacy in the shaping of the United States, the weakening of Marxism in higher education and the US landscape, and the fact that liberalism was the "globally triumphant" worldview of the time (2007, 115).

In his writings after this shift, Mills fails to portray class as a pervasive force and system affecting every domain of life, as race and gender are. Nor does he provide an unequivocal sense of class as a distinct locus of moral wrongfulness, both analogous to race and gender, and like them, contributing to the overall normative character of the larger processes in society that involve them all. However, he does sometimes contrast class and race normatively, arguing that race involves a more serious moral violation than does class. I will argue that his argument does not establish this. In addition, though Mills believes he can pursue his project of theorizing white supremacy without attending to class considerations, I will argue that he cannot successfully do so. For race, I will argue, is not a stand-alone domination system, even one that interacts with other (allegedly) stand-alone ones, such as class and gender. Rather, our understanding of race already incorporates (though only in part) class concepts and processes. In this way, Mills's failure to provide an accurate account of class detracts from his conception of race and white supremacy. For example, he fails to recognize that white supremacy as an actually existing socio-economic-political system can actually harm the legitimate interests of large numbers of whites. My argument requires preserving both race and class as domination systems with their own (though necessarily intersecting) character. Thus, I will be following Mills's strictures in avoiding a "class reductionist" way of thinking about the connections of race and class.

Race's Relation to Class

Both class and race are normatively complex domains. There are several distinct forms of both racial and class wrongfulness and even of the "racial injustice" and "class injustice" subsets of that wrongfulness. In the racial area, for example, racial discrimination, racial inequality, racial insensitivity, racial microaggressions, racial stigma, racial oppression, and racial misrecognition all name distinct (if sometimes partly overlapping) categories of wrongfulness.

Although this internal complexity is itself sometimes lost sight of in discussions of race, it is also quite common for a comparable complexity in the class domain not to be recognized. I want to give some indication of that latter complexity here. The following are all distinct forms of class-based injustice: (1) lack of access to a basic minimum of fundamental human goods such as food, shelter, and health care; (2) unequal family economic and social resources undermining equality of opportunity (understood here as the possibility for occupational success) for the next generation; (3) the gap between different tiers in the economic hierarchy is too great; (4) class standing affects the social valuing (the "social bases of self-respect," in John Rawls's terminology [2001, 60]) generally attached to economic and occupational positions in ways that are unjust and sometimes damaging to their occupants' sense of self-worth; and (5) owners of enterprises exploit their workers. These five categories of injustice are distinct from one another, although there can be overlap among them (e.g., part of the wrongfulness of the inequalities in (3) is that persons in the lower tiers lack the basic minimum in (1)). But all involve "class" broadly construed. Mills does not articulate this complex normative structure of class-based injustice and wrongfulness.

One familiar way class plays an essential role in understanding race is that some of the concepts we use to characterize familiar forms of racial wrongfulness are of a class character. For example, it is generally regarded as in some way unjust or wrong that in the US, whites' median household (family of four) income is $79,000 while Blacks' is $48,000.[1] Comparable racial disparities involve wealth, health, worth and quality of home, and education—all standardly regarded as class phenomena. What makes these disparity-related injuries racial is that the source of the deprivation is the sufferer's racial identity. But what the sufferer is *deprived of* is a good standardly understood in class terms. Not all race-based ills and wrongs are class-based, however. The injury of being stigmatized because of one's race—for example, as a terrorist for being Muslim, or a "foreign" carrier of Covid because of being Asian—is not. Suppression of the Black vote by Republicans is not (Anderson 2019). Nevertheless, many race-related wrongs do involve a class-based dimension. And *some* particular racial stigmas incorporate class-related elements, for instance, a stereotype of Blacks as low-income.[2]

Because some racial injustices involve class categories, class-based processes can contribute to generating them. For example, the degree of (racial) disparity between, and the degree of racial injustice of, the median or mean overall incomes of Blacks and whites are affected by many economic or economic policy factors, such as salaries of different occupations, tax rates for different incomes, the robustness of the society's welfare system that provides public support to people of lower income, and neoliberal economic processes that increase income inequality overall. These processes shrink or exacerbate racial disparities and their degree of injustice but are not driven by an explicit racial logic or intent. ("Disparate impact" is a normative legal term expressing this phenomenon.) Indeed, we can construe "white supremacy" as a scalar concept. That is, a social order can be white supremacist *to different degrees*, depending on degrees of unjust advantage of whites over non-whites, in different domains or overall (in addition to its primary "binary" use referring to a social order with *any* significant degree of white advantage).

This point does not reduce race to class. Economic factors can only exacerbate a racial disparity that has already been created by at least partly racial processes, such as direct racial discrimination or the legacy of race-based structures such as Jim Crow segregation. Nor does the sometimes-causal dependence of racial disparities on class processes imply that in some overall way, class is causally more important than race or vice versa in our current global or national order. Mills plausibly argues that in at least some social orders, such as Nazi Germany and Jim Crow segregation, race was clearly "more important" than class (2003, 163; 2017b, 46; 2003). I am making the more modest claim that in the current social order globally and nationally in the US: it is impossible to give an adequate account of white supremacy without taking account of class. As bell books puts it, "It is impossible to talk meaningfully about ending racism without talking about class" (2000, 7).

Let us now turn to Mills's explicit presentations of class, in its own right and in relation to race. There is no single place where Mills provides an account of class that fully covers his accounts elsewhere, but an important discussion, more extended than his usual references to class, is the following passage from "Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice?" a comparison between race and class with respect especially to the moral character of their ideological underpinnings.

> As such, racial discrimination can be condemned across the liberal spectrum since it breaches the norm of equal personhood and respect upon which liberalism qua liberalism is supposed to rest—the "equal rights" of all "men" trumpeted by the American and French revolutions against the premodern world, the ancien régime of ascriptive hierarchy and differentiated status. […] Racial injustice is, most fundamentally, a refusal to respect equal personhood, whether in the original rights violations or in the legacy of such violations. *Racial injustice is antiliberal*.

> Contrast that with class disadvantage arising out of market workings. In a modern class society, as against a premodern caste society, the white (male) working class is not being kept down by antiliberal laws and discriminatory social practices. Rather people compete on the market, some do worse than others, and the children of the latter grow up in homes and neighborhoods where family resources are thinner and the schools are worse. Presuming the competition was fair by capitalist norms, children will be disadvantaged in escaping their parents' status, but not barred. But a racist society where through discrimination, segregation, etc., poor black kids do not get an equal chance *does* violate capitalist market norms. To be on a lower rung of the social ladder because of bad luck in the social lottery is different from being on a lower rung because of social oppression that denies equal personhood. *Class injustice is anti-left-liberal*.
>
> *(2013, 20)*

This passage sets up a contrast that frames much of Mills's thinking about race and class normatively. It is that racial injustice is a much more substantial moral violation than class injustice, and thus generates a much greater moral claim for prevention, mitigation, and rectification. This is so because, at least in the "classic" period of white supremacy, when it took the forms of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery (and Mills generally counts Jim Crow segregation and South African apartheid in this general category), it consisted in treating and regarding the non-white other as a "sub-person" (1998, 6). He claims there is no counterpart on the class side; the working class were not viewed as sub-persons but rather had a kind of equal status in capitalist societies, as both market agents and citizens. Workers do suffer from the inequities of a capitalist economic and social order, but at a qualitatively lesser moral level than people of color under white supremacy.

Mills identifies treating persons as "sub-persons" with denying them basic rights (often called "negative" rights) such as life, liberty, and property, as colonial, slave, imperialist, and segregationist orders did. He argues that class injustice does not involve such deprivation of basic rights. He sees this distinction as another expression of the way the wrong/injustice involved in white supremacist orders is much greater than that involved in class injustice.

In the quote above, Mills emphasizes that the existence of these race-based social orders in the modern period (at least from the late eighteenth century on) challenges the standard Enlightenment view that (1) the "liberal" revolutions (French and American) established social orders in which liberal rights were honored across all populations; (2) ascriptive hierarchies (ones in which characteristics at birth [such as race, gender, and ancestry] determine one's position as adults in the hierarchical social orders of the society in question) were rejected; and (3) all members of those societies were regarded as persons. These "modern" societies did do away with these ascriptive hierarchies, but only for the white population, not for the subject and enslaved populations. So modern societies remained stratified ones in which persons of color (and women) were not accorded an equal civic status reflective of being regarded as equals. However, it is not clear that the *current* post-colonial (even if neo-colonial) and post-segregationist form of white supremacy dominant in Western countries and indeed on the global arena is still accurately characterized as resting on treating people of color as sub-persons.

Different Regimes, Different Foundations

Mills sometimes explicitly recognizes that "white supremacy" can name historically and normatively significantly different variants. In "Racial Exploitation" (an important source for his views related to class) he says, "Here [i.e., the US or Europe in the present] the inequity does not arise from R2s still being stigmatized as of inferior status, or at least such stigmatization is not essential to the process [presumably, the process resulting in the inequity]. White supremacy is no

longer overt, and the statuses of R1s and R2s have been formally equalized (for example, through legislative change)" (2017a, 125).[3] This is a quite normatively/morally significant difference from classic white supremacy as he understands it. No longer is the polity pervaded with, and regarded by the white population as resting on, the sense that R2s are inherently inferior in a manner captured by the idea of "sub-persons," as it was in the slavery, segregation, and colonial eras. Yet it is still very racially unjust.

A second formulation of the normative difference between different historical white supremacist regimes:

> The present period of de facto global white supremacy is characterized by a more complicated normative arrangement, an abstract/formal extension of previously color-coded principles to the nonwhite population. […] Even though such an extension is a real normative advance, by no means to be despised, it does not constitute a genuine challenge to white supremacy unless and until the means to correct for the effects of past racial subordination are included in the rewriting.
>
> *(1998, 107)*

As in the prior passage, Mills does not supply a positive characterization of the present normative order, only that it involves an "abstract/formal" extension of former principles applicable to the white population to people of color. That characterization seems to deny that replacing the laws of Jim Crow segregation with non-discriminatory and anti-discrimination laws is *substantive*, not just abstract and formal. Genuine rights were extended to people of color that they did not have before. Mills wants to emphasize rights and their honoring as the important marker for whether a group is treated as persons rather than sub-persons. And the shift from Blacks having few rights under Jim Crow to having a full panoply of rights after the civil rights legislation of the 1960s that undermined the legal foundations of Jim Crow seems an important step forward normatively. Because Mills makes rights acknowledgment a measure of whether personhood is being recognized, it seems he cannot think the *current* racially unjust regime rests on a sub-personhood ideology.

Of course, the point Mills is emphasizing in this quote is that the possession of these rights by R2s does not undermine white supremacy as a systemic advantage system; to do that would require rectification of the socio-economic disadvantages created by the prior white supremacy system and not addressed by the kind of rights provided (e.g., civil rights such as the right to vote). That is an important point and shows the limitations of a rights regime that does not address economic or welfare issues. But it does not speak to whether the racial injustices that remain unaddressed are best understood as now resting on a sub-personhood ideology, and in these two passages he seems to be, if unclearly or ambivalently, saying it does not. Mills claims that there is little difference between de jure and de facto regimes of rights, but he may be conflating whether the society remains white supremacist in both cases with whether there is a significant difference in their moral character (and thereby ignoring the latter issue, the one I am concerned with here). Mills builds a case for reparations partly on the "rights violation" idea he connects with classic white supremacy, together with the notion that our current social/racial order is a "legacy" of the classic period. I cannot deal with this complex issue here but want to note that the legacy idea is perfectly consistent with the notion that the current order has a different normative character than classic white supremacy. Just because B is a legacy of A does not mean B has the exact same normative character as A, only that it shares *some* important empirical and normative features (e.g., being racially unjust), in addition to being a causal descendant of A. If we are to compare current white supremacy's moral character to that of the class-based system of injustice, we need a more positive characterization of the former than Mills provides. Material racial injustices continue to characterize our social order. How do we understand the racial attitudes that underlie them, if they are not an attribution of sub-personhood to R2s?

Social psychologists and philosophers have devoted a good deal of attention to this question. By and large, they have produced explanations, some competing, some complementing, that encompass morally problematic attitudes and sentiments. “Aversive racism,” “laissez faire racism,” “cultural racism,” “implicit bias,” “microaggressions,” and “colorblindness” are all wrongful race-related attitudes, sentiments, or ideologies. They involve neither fully regarding the racial other as a sub-person nor a robust sense of equality with racial others, but something in between.

So the difference between these current objectionable racial attitudes and the earlier sub-person forms, like the difference between them and fully egalitarian attitudes, is one of degree, but a degree that constitutes a qualitative difference. Like white supremacy itself, these problematic racial attitudes have a scalar character. A white person who does not embrace strict equality with people of color has morally objectionable views, but ones that do not necessarily fall within the “sub-person” ideological framework. I think the notion of disrespect well captures the intermediate attitudinal terrain of today’s white supremacy, somewhere between equality and the severe degree of inequality of moral status expressed by “sub-person,” and Mills implies this when he writes of violations of the “norm of equal personhood and respect” (2013, 20).[4]

In an attempt to channel Mills’s famous use of diagrams, I suggest a picture that looks something like the following, where “>>>>” means “more morally objectionable than”:

A. <AL1>regarding the racial other as a sub-person >>>>
B. <AL2>disrespecting the racial other >>>>
C. <AL3>regarding the racial other as a full equal

A is more morally objectionable than B, and B is more morally objectionable than C. It is a scale of attitudes differentiated by their moral objectionability. It is also partly historical in that A and B represent different historical periods in white supremacy. Often we want to emphasize how distant both the middle and its extreme counterpart are from the egalitarian attitudes and social order that justice demands, thereby establishing that white supremacy in Mills’s sense still obtains in our current world. And sometimes, as in the discussion here, we have reason to focus on the moral difference *between* the two non-egalitarian categories (regarding sub-persons and racial disrespect). Because Mills is often concerned to make the former point, the latter one is often left insufficiently addressed. Respect, Mills claims, is “linked to a certain positioning in the racial polity” (2018, 159). The mistake I find in Mills is that he has already described the polity in a way that makes social positioning binary in nature—leaving no room for a scalar understanding. Put differently, Mills discusses respect in the spirit of my suggestion here, though without making an explicit distinction between the classic and contemporary forms of white supremacy in which “racial disrespect” operates. In general, Mills treats “racial disrespect” in a binary way, emphasizing the contrast with racial respect and not clearly leaving room for qualitative differences within racial disrespect.

Material Situations of People of Color

In addition to changes in whites’ racial ideology and attitudes, the socio-economic-political situations of people of color in Western societies, though far from just, are of an entirely different order than in the societies of classic white supremacy. To deny this is, for one thing, to deny that the struggles Blacks, Indigenous people, Latino/a’s, and Asian-Americans fought for in their particular movements for civil rights, equality, and freedom (in the US) had a significant impact on the normative character of the resultant social order. For example, people of color are now a much higher proportion of the professional-managerial class than they were before these movements. People of color are routinely in positions of authority over whites. Prohibitions on racial

discrimination are often codified or constitute norms of behavior in organizational settings, permitting challenges to unequal treatment (though far from stamping it out). People of color have the right to vote and can challenge failures of their societies to protect that right.[5] None of this was possible in colonial, slave, or de jure segregated societies. If we acknowledge that white supremacy can have a scalar character (as described above), it would be accurate to say that white supremacy today is distinctly less severe than its classic form.

To repeat, I am in no way questioning whether our current order is white supremacist in Mills's sense of a structure of unjust race-based advantage/disadvantage resting on a historical legacy of a white supremacist society with a sub-person ideology, not only in the sense of its being a causal antecedent but that something of classic white supremacy's character continues to play a role in its contemporary manifestation. I entirely affirm that characterization and share Mills's sense of the moral urgency of fighting against that (current) injustice.

Thus, to summarize, Mills occasionally explicitly recognizes, and recognizes in theory, that the current form of white supremacy rests on a normative foundation distinct from its classic form, in which white supremacy was rationalized by the imputed sub-personhood of Blacks and other people of color.[6] Overall, in its current form, Blacks are not seen as full equals with whites, but they are not seen as sub-persons either. Mills is putting this discussion in service of a contrast between the moral character of class and race; but the relevant contrast requires the absence with respect to class of an ideology or set of attitudes comparable to those of the *current* white supremacist regime. Prior to inquiring into what might be a comparable normative entity on the class side, my point here is that the entity on the race side has to be the contemporary version, not (necessarily) the sub-person version of classic white supremacy.

However, although sometimes recognizing the modern shift to a non-sub-personhood ideological foundation, Mills has a stronger tendency to blur this distinction and to assert that the current form of white supremacy also rests on the denial of personhood, and on a violation of the libertarian rights reflective of that form. For example, in one of his last essays, Mills writes, "If the wrong has involved the systematic denial of personhood […] as racial wrongs typically do, then correction requires that this denial be retracted through a reaffirmation of racial personhood" (2019, 117). Recall the previously quoted claim that "racial injustice [common to both classic and contemporary social orders] is, most fundamentally, a refusal to respect equal personhood" (2013, 20). And that is what he means by his summary statement of the paragraph: "Racial injustice is antiliberal," meaning it violates the basic rights attached to personhood. And Mills implies that this is true of the present.

This view is connected with Mills's thinking, as he says in the long quote (p. 3f), that racial injustice in general, thus in the present as well, would be "condemned across the liberal spectrum," i.e., including libertarian liberals, in contrast to class injustice, which can, he claims, only be condemned by left-wing liberalism but not by libertarians. Mills implies here that this contrast provides a more secure footing, at least in the sense of a wider spectrum of ideological buy-in, for the condemnation of racial injustice than class injustice. But that view is somewhat at odds with his conceding in his 2018 "Racial Justice" that in fact libertarian-liberals do not look at it this way in that they virtually never subscribe to the reparations argument Mills sees as flowing from the libertarian premise of the denial of fundamental "negative" rights to slaves and colonized peoples (81). It also seems inconsistent with his grounding of his own preferred racial justice principles in Rawlsian, "left-liberal," principles, implying that he regards this foundation as fully intellectually sound, and his observation that the Rawlsian version of liberalism (rather than the libertarian) has become hegemonic among liberals (82). Mills's ambivalence or unclarity about the normative foundation of the differing regimes of white supremacy is a problem. If he wants to compare race and class with regard to their normative character, it matters which normative characterization of racial injustice he uses.

Keeping this ambivalence in mind, let us turn to what Mills says about class injustice in the long quote. He supplies no moral critique of the workings of capitalism there and almost implies that the market allocates rewards fairly—assuming the competition was fair (and challenging the labor theory of value; see 2017a, 119; 2018, 28; 2007, 125). In the long block quote above (2013, 20), he recognizes no distinct injustice suffered on the basis of class by low-income or working-class adults, noting injustice only in relation to the workers' offspring's lack of equal opportunity.[7]

Lack of equality of opportunity for the working-class offspring's socio-economic success, and in particular "advanc[ing] beyond their parents' socio-economic situation," is, indeed, an important injustice. Nevertheless, the way Mills characterizes this class injustice in comparison to race is misleading. He says the working-class offspring are "disadvantaged" but not "barred" from escaping their parents' socio-economic lot, implying the Black children are barred. However, Black working-class or low-income children are no longer "barred" from advancement the way they were during the segregation era, where they were excluded by law from well-resourced (white) schools and from many avenues of occupational attainment and success. In the present, a low-income Black child is severely hampered from advancement by attending inferior schools, but not really barred. Though in general *more* disadvantaged than the low-income white student (see below), both are disadvantaged rather than barred.

But in addition, the Black child whose opportunities are being contrasted with the white child is, in Mills's statement, a specifically "*poor* Black kid" (my emphasis). Mills would not think an upper-middle-class Black student today would be "barred" from advancement, as such a student would have been under Jim Crow segregation. By bringing in the Black child's poverty, Mills is no longer comparing the appropriate categories. The pertinent comparison is race vs. class—Blacks *of all classes* vs. low-income working-class whites. But in fact, he compares low-income Blacks and low-income whites. He is thus tacitly acknowledging class processes as part of what disadvantages the "poor black kid," and that the disadvantage is not purely racial. And he is drawing on but not acknowledging a sense of class injustice as part of what he is portraying explicitly as a purely racial injustice.

In addition, the spirit of the long quote does not convey the pervasive and systemic ways class on its own constitutes a barrier to equality of opportunity—for example, that predominantly white working-class schools, e.g., in rural areas, have nothing like the resources and cultural capital of well-resourced white-dominated upper-middle-class schools.[8] Students in those schools (on average—of course, there are many exceptions, as there are in the race case as well) have less qualified teachers, lesser cultural cachet to help students get into good colleges, a weaker culture of achievement, fewer resources for educational programs, and so on. In addition, upper-middle-class students have other life advantages not located in the schools themselves, from their parents' social, cultural, and financial capital. These class-based injustices are greater in the US than in most European countries (Bradbury et al 2015). These injustices are comparable to those of race where class is held constant.

Race and Class in Relation to Exploitation

Another context in which Mills explicitly contrasts class and race is that of exploitation. He says that the proletariat in the metropole is exploited only at the point of production, while the colonized (and also, he claims, the Black and brown inhabitants of the white supremacist metropole) are further economically disadvantaged in all domains of life. He cites, as examples of the latter, Blacks paying more for inferior goods in ghettos, paying higher rent for housing, and Black enterprises not being permitted access to white markets (2003, 188; 2017a, 127–29). Mills refers to this wider disadvantaging as "exploitation."

If we are to understand exploitation in that broader, beyond-the-workplace way, then class exploitation has to be understood in the same way. Low-income workers are disadvantaged not only inside their workplaces but also by the insufficient wages they receive, so that they have to contend with inferior housing, neighborhoods, education, health care, and the ability to provide their children with what they regard as decent life prospects. The intensified inequality of the last 40 years or so has reduced the working class's relative socio-economic position in society across all of its domains (as Mills recognizes elsewhere [2003, 147]).[9]

So, class is a source of pervasive disadvantage, entirely analogous to the pervasive disadvantage in Mills's "racial exploitation," even if the specific forms and processes of disadvantage are partly different in the two contexts. Of course, it is true that Black working-class persons suffer greater disadvantage than working-class whites because they suffer from both class and racial disadvantage ("exploitation" in this context). Well-off Blacks, who may experience some forms of disadvantage (job discrimination in their higher-level workplaces, for example), do *not,* for the most part, experience the forms of disadvantage involved in what Mills means by "exploitation." They are not living in food deserts, paying for inferior goods in ghettos, or paying higher rents (since they are largely homeowners). Mills misstates when he claims that race exploitation is much worse than class exploitation on the grounds that the former goes far beyond the workplace while the latter is limited to the workplace. Both go far beyond the workplace. This is another context in which Mills, without noting it, includes class disadvantages as part of what he portrays as racial disadvantage.

Thus, to summarize, Mills misportrays the comparative character of contemporary race and class injustice by (1) (albeit not consistently) portraying contemporary race obstacles as having the same character they had in classic racially ordered societies (resting on sub-personhood ideology); (2) incorporating class characteristics and processes into the characterization and implied normative assessment of racial disadvantage but without noting this; and (3) failing to articulate class as a deep and pervasive structure of disadvantage and injustice, including the range of such forms mentioned (inadequate access to fundamental goods, too great disparities in economic resources, inequality of opportunity, social devaluing, exploitation in the workplace).[10] He thus understates the character of current class injuries and (though not consistently) overstates the character of racial ones, and does not establish that racial injury is morally much worse than class injury, as he is claiming in the long quote above (2013, 20).

We can plausibly regard class-related harms as often comparable to race-related harms in character. Many such harms are straightforwardly material—inadequate nourishment, housing, health care, and job opportunities. In addition, there are harms of what are often called "recognition," which Mills refers to as "respect." Being regarded as a sub-person, even apart from any material exploitation and deprivation flowing from that, is a serious personal harm, as Mills emphasizes. In its non-sub-person form, racial disrespect is harmful. But low-income people of any race, including whites, are subject to those harms as well. Low-income people are often disrespected by higher (upper middle and upper) class people, often (especially in the US) seen as failures, their low socio-economic status being taken as reflecting their inferior "merit" and capability. As in the racial situation, for the economically disadvantaged, disrespect therefore adds insult to (material) injury, and low-income people often internalize that disrespect as shame for their class position (see hooks 2000; Sayer 2005; Sandel 2021; Sennett and Cobb 1973).[11]

This is not to say that every comparable harm has the exact same character and severity in the race and the class case. For example, because of its history, current anti-Black stigma may well be more severe, on average, than anti-low-income stigma (for whites). But this average difference in degree (in *some* cases, class stigma will be greater than racial stigma) does not make them of entirely different kinds, as Mills's argument implies (see Blum 2023).

If class and race harms and injustices are comparable, this has implications for Mills's claim (echoed in much of the literature on white supremacy) that white supremacy benefits all whites, a claim he qualifies in this way: "The claim that racial exploitation [of Blacks by whites] exists does not commit one to the claim that its benefits are all necessarily distributed equally" (2017a, 121). Indeed, it may seem true by definition—white supremacy as a system of white advantage—that all whites must benefit from it. But some whites may be better off than some relevantly comparable Blacks yet without themselves benefiting from the white supremacist social order. Aspects of the complex white supremacy structure can work against the interests of particular subgroups of whites.

For example, seeking to retain advantage over people of color can blind some whites to their shared interests with people of color in circumstances that can be quite important for their well-being, such as securing more robust health care, preserving social security benefits in the face of attempts to weaken them, or having a union or not. Whites can be misled into thinking that their belief that they are superior to people of color is a genuine good to them when, based on a falsehood, it is illusory and interferes with their ability to seek common class-based goods through concerted action (see Tanchuk et al 2021). Their white supremacist belief that Black people are unworthy sometimes expresses itself in hostility toward government assistance for vulnerable people generally—for example, Southern state governments' declining to expand their Medicaid programs permitted under the Affordable Care Act that would have benefited low-income whites in those states. (As of February 2024, 10 US states had not accepted federal funding to expand Medicaid that would provide health coverage to low-income adults in their state.) In these ways, institutional forms and ideologies of white supremacist societies can systematically disadvantage low-income people of every race, and thereby whites.

Mills's recognition of the differential benefit of white supremacy to whites does not provide a principled way of holding that benefit at zero. The differential benefit logic opens up the possibility that some whites not only benefit minimally but are actually harmed in an overall way (if not, of course, in every single respect) by white supremacy. Mills does sometimes recognize that white workers might do better either in a non-racist social democratic or a socialist social order than they are doing in their current form of white supremacist capitalism. He suggests that a "convincing case can be made that though they [i.e., white workers] do gain in this present order, they lose by comparison to an alternative one" (2017a, 133). He thinks about what might be done to help white workers recognize this so as to join in an interracial alliance to bring about that more beneficial social order. But saying that white low-income workers could benefit in a non-racist social order is not quite to acknowledge that the current white supremacist order actually harms them. It does so because features of white supremacy harm their class-related (among other) interests.[12]

Class is deeply implicated in the white supremacist order, and in the racial order more generally. It helps to situate our understanding of what it does and does not mean to say that a given social order is "white supremacist." We cannot take that to mean that it automatically benefits all white people. And we cannot examine its racial dynamic purely on its own, as Mills said he thought he could do, for class considerations are internal to white supremacy and to its normative character.

Oppression Asymmetries

Mills argues on substantive grounds that race is a stronger determinant of people's life conditions than class or gender. At one point, he makes this argument in the context of a more general rejection of the "Oppression Symmetry Thesis" (OST), the view that all forms of oppression are equally "morally bad" or equally causally significant (2003, 161–64; 2017b, 47). Mills is partially defending Marx's implicit rejection of OST, but also saying Marx was wrong to accord class the asymmetric primacy over other social dominance axes. Rather, Mills argues, race has that primacy.

I will not examine Mills's view on this issue further, except to say that my argument in this essay does not require OST, and I agree with Mills in rejecting it. Indeed, I think my own view is even compatible with Mills's granting race primacy over class in some significant respect (though not in every respect). I am arguing only that class is very important in the life situations of people of color, that what we think of as "race" is already entwined with class considerations, and that Mills fails to give class its due, both in itself and in relation to race. I am not explicitly arguing that class is "more important" than race overall, and I am not certain a clear meaning can be attached to that claim.

We can shed light on Mills's inadequate account of class and its relationship to race by reminding ourselves of the historical context of the colonialist, slavery, and imperialist systems that constituted the initial, classic forms of white supremacy in our world. Mills's account of these systems emphasizes their racial character, which, as we have seen, he frames as whites treating people of color (as slaves, colonial, and imperial subjects) as sub-persons. But these historical systems of oppression were not only racial and racist projects but capitalist (and nationalist) ones as well. The capitalist dimension combined an extreme form of coerced labor exploitation and resource extraction in the "periphery" with market-based exploitation of workers in the metropole (in settler colonialism-with-slavery, as in the US, both processes took place in the metropole). These systems not only denied personhood in the recognitional/evaluative sense but, as Mills also often notes, relied on the sub-personhood ideology to justify their exploitative and extractive economic practices (2017a, 124)**.** But the capitalist dimension also combined with the racial dimension to send the extracted wealth of the colonies back to the metropole, advantaging the (then white) proletariat in the metropole, though of course to nothing like the degree it enriched the capitalist class (Rodney 2018).

In the post-colonial world, former colonial subjects immigrated to the (former) metropoles (UK, France, Belgium, Netherlands, etc.), seeking economic advancement. Joining white workers as citizens in those societies, they enjoy some of the benefits of the prior colonialist wealth transfer, lifting them substantially above their fellow workers in their former homelands in the periphery, as they seek to do through immigrating to the metropoles. In that way, they benefit to some degree from the capitalist/nationalist dimension of the colonial project.

But as (descendants of) racialized former subjects, they are also often discriminated against in the metropoles and so do not experience that capitalist/colonialist benefit to the same degree as the white workers. Nevertheless, they also share with the native white proletariat the pervasive material disadvantage and multiple forms of class injustice of at least a substantial, low-income segment of the proletariat under capitalism. Mills is, of course, aware of all these processes, but his focusing only on the purely racial character of white supremacist capitalism often leads him to overlook both the ongoing structures of class domination and injustice that operate on former colonial subjects and their descendants now in the metropole and also the benefits of prior capitalist colonialism that the proletariat-of-color accrues by living in the metropoles.

Mills generally fails to bring into view these capitalist and nationalist dimensions of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, and of the post-colonial social order, and therefore how those features continue to interact with its distinctly racial dimensions. He very clearly recognizes the economic dimensions of white supremacy (2003, 187–89, 204–10). However, he seldom attaches economic disadvantage and exploitation to a distinctly Black, Latino/a, and Indigenous segment of the low-income working class in the present, whose simultaneous location as people of color in a white supremacist system and members of a significantly disadvantaged class in a class domination system renders them disadvantaged along those two distinct but very intertwined axes of disadvantage. This lacuna, and his more general failure to keep both the capitalist and the white supremacist systems in his analytical field of vision, are reflected in Mills's inadequate account of class in contemporary white supremacist orders.

Conclusion

We should also situate Mills's published work on class and race, and what I am arguing are some of its inadequacies, in historical political context, noting two particular recent developments. The first is the greatly increased public attention to racial justice issues, occasioned partly by the Black Lives Matter movement founded in 2013 and ramped up by the enormous, global, public response to the killing of George Floyd in 2020. Many Western countries, in addition to the US, have seen the kind of public attention to racial injustice Mills called for.[13]

A second pertinent development is the rise of a post-communist socialist or social democratic presence in American political life, a result of several different factors, one certainly being the disenchantment with neoliberal capitalism, initially occasioned by the Great Recession of 2008–09, another, noted specifically by Mills, a degrading of the life and work conditions of many sectors of the proletariat (Dawson 2019). Mills's earlier turn away from class-related concerns, and from Marxism, had been occasioned *in part* by his sense that the socialist and Marxist political traditions were, at least for the foreseeable future, nowhere on the horizon. Mills stated this point of view quite starkly in 2012: "It seemed (and seems) to me that at the present time period, in this country [the US], given its history, the declaration of an anti-capitalist agenda will immediately isolate and marginalize you" (2012, 337). As we have seen, for some years Mills had looked to the liberal tradition for the intellectual resources to engage with race politically and to bring race into the mainstream of political philosophy and thought. I am not here able to assess his specific project of founding anti-racism on liberalism (see Darby 2019), but nor is it clear to me how fully intellectually (as contrasted with strategically) attached he was to that project. However, the combination of his abandonment of Marxism and socialism, and liberalism's weak foundation for an understanding of class, surely contributed to Mills's own pulling away from a focus on class that had informed some of his earlier work on race.

But as Mills began to recognize, at least with the Occupy movement of 2011, these new progressive and even (from the perspective of the 2000s) radical forces in American political life could ground hope for wider movements for progressive change than he had seen in the prior 30 years or so. In his occasional remarks about the possibilities of interracial political alliance and movement, Mills criticized a traditional class-based approach that ignored race and hoped racial division would be overcome by a focus on shared class interests (Dawson 2019). He did not remark on, and may not have been aware of, a fairly recent development in interracial organizing that brings an explicit anti-racist focus into a class-anchored approach. This approach calls out racism but also emphasizes ways that racism hurts whites as well as people of color, rather than leading with a demand that low-income and working-class whites abandon their (alleged) white privilege (Haney-Lopez 2019). Very occasionally, one sees in Mills's late writings a suggestion that more decisively left traditions could speak to the possibility of an anti-racist future in the context of definitively progressive and even socialist political movements (Dawson 2019; Mills 2018). Perhaps if he had lived longer, he might have turned more toward a synthesis of race and class (possibly in its Marxist form), bolstered by a greater hopefulness for the possibilities of an interracial movement for progressive and radical change.[14]

I have argued that Mills is correct to see white supremacy as a sociopolitical order with its own character and logic, not reducible to, nor a mere expression of, a more fundamental class-based social order. But I have argued that neither is white supremacy as autonomous from the structures of class injustice as Mills implies. I have argued that, in his writings, Mills fails to portray class as a domination system with its distinctive forms of harm and injustice that are inextricably intertwined with the racial domination system and its particular normative character. He fails to recognize clearly how class interests can result in white low-income workers, overall, being harmed rather than benefiting from white supremacist structures and ideologies.

Race cannot be understood apart from class, and Mills's attempt to do so weakens his account of race. But Mills's permanent contribution to contemporary political philosophy and political thought more generally was to press a recognition of race as a social system structuring, and rendering unjust and wrong, the national and global social orders of our time—thereby requiring of political philosophy that racial justice be a core concern of social justice.[15]

Notes

[1] United States Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, 2021 and 2022 Annual Social and Economic Supplements*. https://www.pgpf.org/blog/2022/11/income-and-wealth-in-the-united-states-an-overview-of-recent-data (Peter Peterson Institute).

[2] I will sometimes follow Mills in speaking only of Blacks with regard to racial injustice, but he often means Blacks to stand in for people of color in general. And yet his overall project is concerned with the specificity of the Black experience in the modern world. I will sometimes, but not always, also treat the cited example of Blacks in that general way.

[3] Mills often uses the "R1/R2" terminology to refer to racial domination systems in general, with R1 implied as white and R2 as people of color, or sometimes Blacks in particular. I will sometimes follow him in that usage. When Mills says that "white supremacy is no longer overt," he presumably means that white advantage is no longer officially declared to be morally appropriate. He does not mean to deny that white advantage is a matter of empirical and visible sociohistorical fact (as "no longer overt" might be thought to imply).

[4] I am indebted to my former student Hannah Carrillo for the idea that there could be a form of racial disrespect rendering the racial other less degraded than what is involved in "sub-personhood."

[5] Recent attempts by several Republican-dominated legislatures in the United States to restrict voting by people of color—though never acknowledged explicitly as the actual target of that legislation—reveal that large swaths of the American political class do not fully accept (but nor do they fully reject, as in the Segregation era) the equal right to vote for citizens of all racial groups. (See Anderson 2019).

[6] Another periodization Mills sometimes articulates concerns the rise of Enlightenment egalitarianism mentioned earlier. Prior to that, slavery and colonialism did not rely as much on a "sub-personhood" ideology because those domination systems were by and large not challenged and were not regarded as requiring a morally-based ideological justification. Mills accepts George Frederickson's view that the sub-personhood ideology degraded the slave to a lower human status than in the pre-Enlightenment period (2018, 15).

[7] I will generally use "low-income" (standardly defined in the US as double the poverty line) to characterize the generic class-disadvantaged category.

[8] I am avoiding the terminology of "middle class" because its use in general American discourse is so imprecise. While, as in educational contexts, it is often used to contrast with "working class," in other contexts, many working-class people also (or instead) identify as "middle class," and that usage is also entirely familiar in popular discourse. For my purposes in this essay, the designation "upper middle class" will serve well enough.

[9] I do not define "working class" here. While it matters how one defines it, the broad-stroked categories I am employing in the context of Mills's argument may not require it. In the US, lack of a college degree might be a rough and ready definition, which would also include "low income" persons. I generally use "working class" when referring to the proletariat, or in a distinctly Marxist intellectual context, and "low income" when referring more specifically to class disadvantage.

[10] In the long quote (2013, 20), Mills refers to "the white (male) working class." He may be thinking of the working class in Marx's time, and perhaps also the view of the working class in the literature he calls "white Marxism." But the context here should be pulling for the actual working class of contemporary American society. I think it is fair to say that in Mills's writing in general,

there is little recognition that the working class in the US is composed, and disproportionately so, of women, Blacks, Latino/as, and Indigenous women and men. Was Mills aware of this demographic fact? Of course. But this awareness almost never makes its way into his theorizing about class and race.

[11] Bell hooks, a prominent Black feminist, writes poignantly about her mother's sense of class-based shame, summarizing it: "[H]er sense of shame around class was deep and intense" (2000, 28).

[12] An example of *non*-class-based white interests harmed by white supremacy is Southern US cities in the 1960s shutting down their municipal swimming pools rather than comply with a directive to integrate them, thereby depriving white families of public access to swimming. (McGhee 2021, chapter 2).

[13] It is not clear how much the actual situation of disadvantaged Blacks, browns, and Indigenous peoples in the US has been significantly improved by the public attention mentioned. I am grateful to Mickaella Perina for calling my attention to this point.

[14] But Mills always thought of himself as a "radical," including when he was working within a liberal framework, as expressed in his preferred designation for his own position, "Black radical liberalism" and his close association with the Radical Philosophy Association (Jones 2022, 245).

[15] I am grateful to both my "race/class" group (Mickaella Perina and Christopher Lewis) for feedback on an earlier draft of this paper and for conversations on these issues over the past four years, and my Race and Philosophy group (Elvira Basevich, Jorge Garcia, Sally Haslanger, Adam Hosein, Josė Mendoza, Megan Mitchell, and Tommie Shelby) for conversations about race over many years.

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