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**On Charles Mills’s “Black Radical Kantianism:”
A Story of Grief as/and/or Gratitude**

“White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today,” reads the first sentence of *The Racial Contract*. That sentence is my North Star. When I get lost in philosophical texts or arguments about justice, I look to this sentence to reorient myself, and a radical clarity follows. The depth of my commitment to this sentence is only rivaled by the depth of my grief as/and/or gratitude for my 17 years of friendship with Charles Mills.

In this remembrance essay I reflect on Mills’s “Black Radical Kantianism,” (2018) situating it in light of his earlier work on Kant, history of philosophy, political philosophy, and race, and demonstrating the lasting impact of Mills’s work especially on Kant Studies and Kantian moral-legal-political philosophy.

As I continue to think about his Black Radical Kantianism (BRK), I am committed to two things that at first sight may seem contradictory. I want *both* to acknowledge Mills’s radicalization of Kantianism as a major win toward making white supremacy visible in Kant Studies and political philosophy *and* to remain skeptical of Mills’s strategy of revising liberalism and especially Kantianism for reparative justice projects. After all, holding multiple and seemingly contradictory truths at once is something I have learned from Charles, as it will become clear.

Introductions

I met Charles Mills at the Society of Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) meeting in Memphis in 2004. This was my first time at a major national philosophy conference. I met a lot of famous scholars at that meeting, most of whom appeared to be full of themselves and their accomplishments. Then I met this unassuming guy. He told me his name was Chuck. He said he lived in Chicago, but he was originally from Jamaica. He worked on race and political philosophy. I took him to be another graduate student at the conference.

We hit it off well; I remember lecturing him for half an hour about how race relations worked in Turkey, and he allowed me to articulate – mostly to myself – how global white supremacy operates and thrives differently under different historical and geographical conditions. He listened to me free-associating about this, with a keen interest, and then thanked me for thinking through race in a non-U.S. context. When I turned around and left, a friend asked me: "What did you and Professor *Charles Mills* talk about?!" You can imagine how I was so embarrassed to have explained "race" to him: me, a first-year graduate student, and him, the author of *the* book on race and political philosophy, *The Racial Contract*!

If I needed hard, personal evidence that white supremacy made the world what it is today, it was right there in my assumption that then a 50-something year old Black man would be a graduate student. As a philosopher in the making, I was already initiated into and shaped by the whiteness of the profession, and what a professor looks like. As one of Charles's famous jokes went, going to a philosophy conference was (and still is) a lot like going skiing, because in both cases you are going to get immediately blinded by the whiteness! Thanks to his world-renowned generosity, he had not corrected my assumption and had allowed me to think out loud with him about race and my native country. He made me realize that this was a philosophical conversation

in and of itself, even though “philosophy of race” and “critical philosophy of race” were newly emerging subfields then.

Over the years, we became fast conference friends, and he acted as my unofficial mentor after I received my Ph.D. I have read almost all of his works since then. Not only that, but I have also taught *The Racial Contract* in all my classes on social and political philosophy in the past fifteen years. Later on, we would work together on translating *The Racial Contract* into Turkish. *Irksal Sözleşme*—an impeccable translation, as I informed him—came out in the summer of 2020 from a major leftist publisher in Turkey. I helped to edit the translation and wrote a Foreword in Turkish, entitled, “Rethinking ‘Race’ in Political Philosophy: On Mills, the Concept of ‘Race,’ and Turkey”.¹ He had a hard time getting a copy of the book at first during early Covid-19 pandemic. And then, deep in quarantine, he sent me a picture of himself holding the book, with the subject “TA-DA”! (Exhibit A)

¹ On the impact of Charles Mills’s work in Turkey, see also Baris Ünlü’s work, especially his essay “‘Turkishness Contract and Turkish Left’”: [link here](#) (his book, *Turkishness Contract* is forthcoming in English).



Exhibit A - Charles holding the Turkish translation of *The Racial Contract*, October 2020.

Sometimes I invited Charles to attend – virtually - a session of my classes where I teach *The Racial Contract*, and he often – happily - obliged. During these times, it seemed to me that we shared the enthusiasm for and the unique opportunity of discussing our ideas with a room full of smart young people, namely, undergraduates, who were not – yet - bound by disciplinary conventions and did not bother with heavy jargon. Last time we got together to teach *The Racial Contract* was during early quarantine of Fall 2020 in my *History of Political Philosophy* class (Exhibit B). He tirelessly and generously answered all my students’ questions about how to dismantle white supremacy, this time in the wake of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd’s murders that had taken place the summer before. “We have a long haul when it comes to racial justice in this country,” he told them.

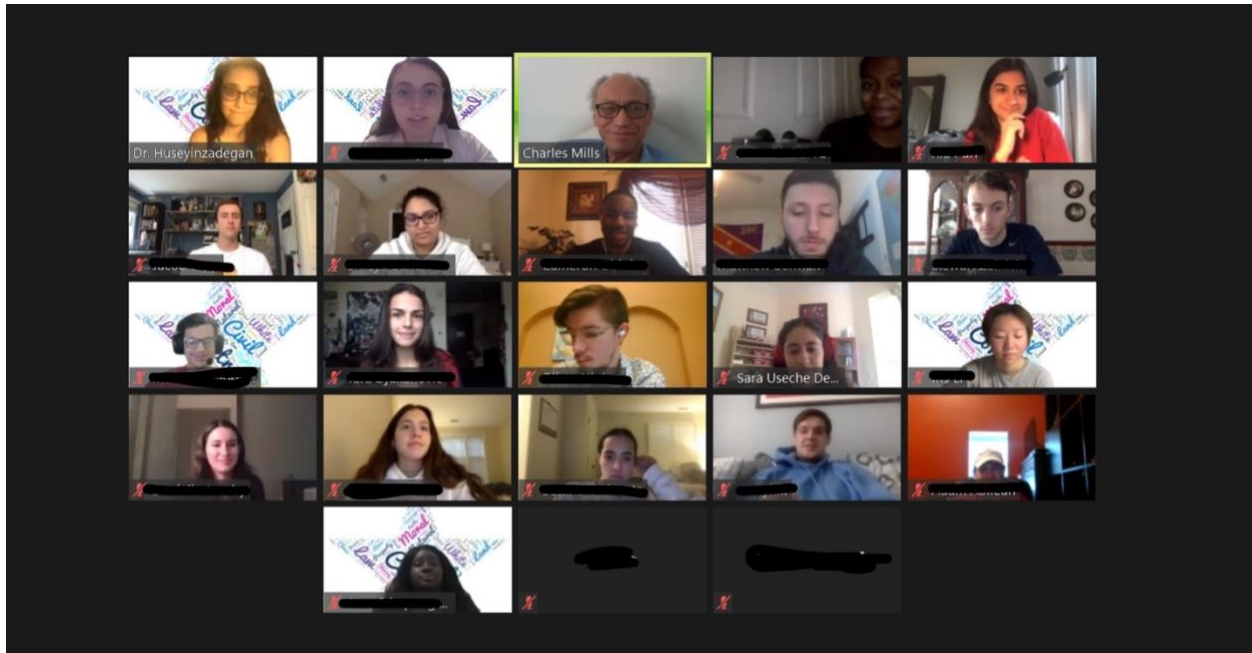


Exhibit B – Charles talking to the undergraduate students in my *History of Political Philosophy* students on Zoom in October 2020.

The Impact of Mills’s Work on Kant Studies and Kantian Social-Political Philosophy

To situate Mills’s work on Kant and Kantianism, let me go back to *The Racial Contract*, which I said is my North Star.

As is well known, Mills coins and develops the term “the racial contract,” in his monumental and punchy 1997 book of the same name. The term refers to the political, moral, and epistemological agreements among whites. Such an agreement is a historical fact of “an exploitation contract that creates global European economic domination and national white racial privilege.”² As a result of the series of implicit or explicit agreements, our world today consists

² Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 31; see also Charles W. Mills, “Kant and Race, Redux” 138.

of variations of polities with a two-tiered system, which Mills calls, borrowing Pierre van den Berghe's phrase, "*Herrenvolk* democracies."³

In these real world *Herrenvolk* democracies, we furthermore find a *partitioned social ontology*, that is, as "a universe divided between persons and racial subpersons, *Untermenschen*, who may variously be black, red, brown, yellow--slaves, aborigines, colonial populations."⁴ In his "Intersecting Contracts," Mills revises his conceptual apparatus and develops an intersectional "racia-sexual contract," operative under the system of "racial patriarchy." In this way, he argues that the social contract of the liberal tradition, both in theory and actual history, *embeds* the racia-sexual contract, in the sense that it is grounded in an implicit or explicit hierarchical political anthropology of who counts as a full legal-moral-political person in a given body politic, i.e., a theory of persons, subpersons, and nonpersons.⁵ To recap, there is an implicit agreement that only *white men* are full persons, and everyone else is a subperson or a nonperson.

Here, Mills offers the term "subpersons" as a formal concept to make explicit "the actual division in the ranks of humanity historically presupposed by most liberal theorists, but now being covered up for being too revealing of the real imperial and racist history."⁶ And this "world historical cover-up" precisely, is how Kant (and Kantianism as well as Kant Studies) comes into play. This is the line of thinking that Mills develops in his provocatively-titled 2005 essay "Kant's *Untermenschen*."

³ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 28. For a fuller account of *Herrenvolk* ethics, see also Charles W. Mills, "White Right: The idea of a *Herrenvolk* Ethics" in his 1998 book, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*

⁴ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 16.

⁵ See Charles W. Mills and Carole Pateman, *Contract and Domination*, 172. For a Black feminist critique of Mills's attempt to incorporate intersectionality into the racial contract, see Kathryn Sophia Belle's "Black Feminist Reflections on Charles Mills's 'Intersecting Contracts'"; On the problem of treating gender, race, and class separately in Kant Studies and liberal feminism, see Dilek Huseyinzadegan and Jordan Pascoe, "Kant and Feminist Political Thought, Redux: Complicity, Accountability and Refusal."

⁶ Charles W. Mills, "Kant and Race, Redux," 138.

In case you missed it: Immanuel Kant, an important figure in contemporary conceptualizations of liberalism in moral-political philosophy, devoted a significant part of his career to elaborating, both via his teaching and scholarship, a philosophy of race. In these lectures and writings, he theorized about the unchanging characteristics of persons and subpersons and eventually helped to make the concept of “race” scientifically legitimate. Kant is a part of the liberal social contract tradition, and that is almost universally agreed upon.

But even after Emanuel Chukwudi Eze broke the “news” to philosophers about Kant and “the color of reason,” and Robert Bernasconi rose up to the seemingly daunting task of deep diving into this *real historical racist Kant* via impeccable archival research and turned up with the receipts, so to speak,⁷ Kant Studies have continued to ignore Kant’s theorizations of race for the last few decades. Moral and political scholars have argued that Kant’s racist, Eurocentric, and misogynistic claims present “inconsistencies” with or “anomalies” to his cosmopolitan egalitarian thought. When confronted with these “ugly” parts of Kantian philosophy reifying a white supremacist racial and sexual hierarchy of human beings, Kant scholars insisted that these texts lack the rigor of his critical or major writings, and thus are but a minor part of Kant’s overall philosophy. We thus continued to *argue for a strict separation between the two sets of writings* and have been advised to discard *at least half of what Kant said, taught, and wrote on history, anthropology, or geography throughout his entire life*. For a long time, this was the dominant trend in Kant Studies for grappling with the question of racism in Kant’s work.

⁷ Emanuel Chukwudi Eze, “The Color of Reason: The Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology;” *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*; and Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race”; “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism;” “Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment racism to the study of the history of philosophy”; “Why Do the Happy Inhabitants of Tahiti Bother to Exist at All?”; “Kant and Blumenbach’s Polyps: A Neglected Chapter in the History of the Concept of Race”; “Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race”; “Silencing the Hottentots: Kolb’s Pre-Racial Encounter with the Hottentots and Its Impact on Buffon, Kant, and Rousseau.”

By the way, another more absurd option is now available in Kant Studies regarding this question and it is becoming a dogma of its own. It is Pauline Kleingeld's thesis in "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race" that Kant changed his mind about the racial hierarchy of human beings somewhere around in 1795 because he does not mention race directly in "Perpetual Peace" or later until his death in 1804.⁸ This myth of the "death-bed conversion scene" has mercifully been debunked by Bernasconi in his "Kant's Third Thoughts on Race," which supplies us with plenty of historical and philosophical evidence to the contrary.⁹ Nonetheless, this point of view has its numerous subscribers in the field – but as Mills points out, even if Kleingeld's claim is true, then we still need to admit "a Kant *who, for most of his professional life, was a racist and a supporter of slavery and colonialism, only changing his mind in the last years of his life.*"¹⁰

Mills takes a different tack on the question of Kant and racism, a position he develops both in "Kant's *Untermenschen*" (2005) and his later essay "Kant and Race, Redux" (2014). Remaining skeptical of the "Kant may have changed his mind in the last few years of his life" theory, Mills instead adopts the "symbiosis thesis." This entails the reality of the non-anomalous, rather *symbiotic* relation between liberalism and racism. He thus argues that "when we are reading classical liberal or political theorists as if they were making race- or gender-neutral pronouncements, we are anachronistically misrepresenting them."¹¹

According to Mills's "symbiosis thesis," then, *all* of Kant's writings—the a priori and the a posteriori, the pure and the impure, the ideal and the nonideal, the transcendental and the

⁸ Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race."

⁹ Robert Bernasconi, "Kant's Third Thoughts on Race."

¹⁰ Charles W. Mills, "Kant and Race, Redux," 148-149.

¹¹ Charles W. Mills, "Kant's *Untermenschen*," 33

empirical, the moral and the teleological, constitute a consistent and integrated whole.¹² It is not the case that liberalism accidentally gave rise to racial, social, and political inequalities. Rather, these inequalities were justified by means of various successful and prevalent ideologies of white supremacy, which, according to Mills, continue to provide the epistemic orientation of mainstream social political philosophy as well as the basic structure of our world today. So: white supremacy is actually consistent with liberalism, and vice versa.

An emerging progressive trend in Kant Studies thus owes a great debt of gratitude to Charles Mills's symbiosis thesis, which allowed us to recognize both Kant's racism and Kant scholars' complicity in the "world-historical cover up" of an embarrassing truth about one of the founding fathers of liberalism. Thanks to Mills's body of work in these areas, we can now at least openly claim that there is a consistent integration of Kant's moral-legal-political theory with his racist, sexist, and Eurocentric anthropology. We can argue that Kant's was a racialized liberalism, that a legal and moral "person" was his equivalent of a white man. In other words, we can see that he was a "consistent inegalitarian," and we do this by following Mills's careful analyses in "Kant and Race, Redux." Here, Mills reminds Bernasconi of Sartre's famous lines from his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, that "there is *nothing more consistent than a racist humanism*...On the other side of the ocean there was a race of less-than-humans."¹³ In other words, there is *no internal contradiction* in Kant's thought, but "a more or less consistently racialized (and gendered) body of thought;" or as Mills puts it in "Kant and Race, Redux:"

Kant could be the father of modern racial theory at the same time as he was the father of modern western normative theory because modern western normative theory, in its dominant form,

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Kant and Race, Redux, 143n52 My emphases.

incorporates a *Herrenvolk* ethic that rationalizes and justifies the racial hegemony of the west over the rest of the world.¹⁴

As seen in the recent works of Kant scholars like myself and Huaping Lu-Adler, Elvira Basevich, Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou, Jennifer Mensch, Inder Marwah, Inés Valdez, Jordan Pascoe, David Baumeister, among many others,¹⁵ this integrated account of Kant's writings is now acceptable, thanks to Mills. And we can now begin to take a fresh, critical approach to Kant and Kantianism, as Mills advised us to do throughout his career. In addition, North American Kant Studies website now has a list of resources on Kant and race. This was unimaginable only a few years ago, and it is made possible in large part by Mills's literally groundbreaking approach in these fields.

As I mentioned, my first book, *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* (2019) is inspired to a large extent by Mills's work on political philosophy, Kant, and race. In the book, like most Kant scholars, I make a systemic distinction between Kant's ideal and nonideal theories of politics. Unlike most Kant scholars, however, I follow Mills's symbiosis thesis and his critique of ideal theory as ideology,¹⁶ and show that the two parts of Kant's political thought cannot be considered independently of one another: that they are *complementary*. Kant's so-called minor writings on history, anthropology, and geography utilize his systematic principle of teleology. These writings, which I now call "Kant's *nonideal* theory of politics," specify to whom, under what conditions, and where his ideal theory is applicable. I conclude that Kant's political

¹⁴ Kant and Race, Redux, 150.

¹⁵ See for instance, Jameliah Inga Shorter-Bourhanou, "Reinventing Kant?"; Inés Valdez, *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, DuBois and Justice as a Political Craft*; Jordan Pascoe, *Kant's Theory of Labor*; Jennifer Mensch, "Caught Between Character and Race: "Temperament" in Kant's Lectures on Anthropology"; Inder Marwah, "White Progress: Kant, Race, and Teleology"; Huaping Lu-Adler, "Kant on Lazy Savagery, Racialized"; Elvira Basevich "Reckoning with Kant on Race"; David Baumeister, *Kant on the Human Animal: Anthropology, Ethics, Race*.

¹⁶ Charles W. Mills, "Ideal Theory as Ideology." On how this ideal-nonideal distinction may translate to Kant's and Kantian political philosophy, see Dilek Huseyinzadegan, *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics*; especially pp. 3-20.

philosophy including his cosmopolitanism exclusively applies to white upper-middle class western European men. In this way, he is a consistent inegalitarian.

In other words, the book argues that Kant's ideal theory of politics is white supremacist, antiBlack, Eurocentric ideology. I conclude with the hope of a "more honest Kantianism" that can one day account for the historical fact of the racia-sexual contracts with which it remains complicit. However, my own deep dive into Kant's critical system and the fundamental role of teleology in his political philosophy left me deeply pessimistic about the redemption of any Kantian normative ideals. In particular, it seemed to me that the story of a teleological progress, a deep commitment of Kantianism as I show in my book, is at odds with the political history and cartography of Black experiences of modernity, which shapes the normative framework of Black Radical Tradition.¹⁷ It appeared to me that Charles Mills and I would agree that the Kantian normative system is intertwined with and cannot be thought separately from its Eurocentric, antiBlack, cisheteropatriarchal presuppositions about a teleological view of history, culture, and human nature.

While I was slowly losing my faith in the universal ideals of Kantianism, however, Mills thought that liberalism was retrievable for radical political purposes. Cue Mills's 2018 essay "Black Radical Kantianism" or his BRK, which in many ways is that "more honest Kantianism."

I should have known better, of course. In his 2012 piece "Occupy Liberalism!" Mills had already started thinking about the possibilities of a radical left liberalism.¹⁸ And Mills's BRK is a

¹⁷ I refer to the following works (this is a nonexhaustive and mostly historical list): Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Tradition*. See also: Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*; bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Praxis*; Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: Black Radical Imagination*; Michael Sawyer, *Black Minded: The Political Philosophy of Malcolm X*; Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*; Gosse, Van, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History*.

¹⁸ First appearing as "Occupy Liberalism! Or, Ten Reasons Why Liberalism Cannot be Retrieved for Radicalism (and Ten Reasons why They're All Wrong)" in *Radical Philosophy Review* 15/2 (2012), this piece is reprinted in his 2017 *Black Rights/White Wrongs* under the shorter title "Occupy Liberalism!"

part of this broader project of what he terms “Black radical liberalism,” a radical rethinking and reformulation of liberalism in light of the historical injustices of global white supremacist domination. According to his 2017 *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, Black radical liberalism synthesizes Black nationalism and Black Marxism, and is grounded by a *radicalized* Kantian (or Rawlsian) normative conceptual apparatus.”¹⁹ The key figures of a Black Radical Liberalism are Kant, Marx, and Du Bois, and it has two central premises:

1. *Race and racism are central rather than marginal to Western political theory, and this requires that we theorize white supremacy as a political system in its own right.*
2. *“Kant is not committed to universality (in the sense of imputing equal moral standing to all humans), but rather to a bifurcated ethics in which the innate and unchanging inferior nature of white women and people of color limits them permanently to sub-person status.”*²⁰

To be sure, Mills proposes BRK as a “Kantian exercise” and “especially for a largely white philosophical readership.”²¹ He also cites Kant’s rise to centrality in contemporary western normative theory over the last half-century as one strategic reason for turning to Kant:

Immanuel Kant is now regarded not merely as the most important ethicist of modernity, but as one of its most significant normative political theorists also. So a racially-informed engagement with this body of discourse would have the virtues of being in dialogue with what is now the central strand in Western ethico-political theory: Afro-modern political thought in conversation with Euro-modern political thought.²²

He says that he wants to show this readership how recognizable Black freedom projects could be when translated to their mainstream - Kantian-Rawlsian - language and positions.²³

Let’s get clear on one thing: Mills’s BRK does something fundamentally different from other contemporary appropriations of Kant and Kantianism. BRK is not what Jasmine Gani calls

¹⁹ Charles W. Mills, “Epilog as Prolog: Toward a Black Radical Liberalism,” 202-3

²⁰ Charles W. Mills, “Black Radical Kantianism,” 10, my emphases.

²¹ Charles W. Mills, “Black Radical Kantianism,” 18.

²² Charles W. Mills, “Black Radical Kantianism,” 3.

²³ Ibid.

“a mere upgrade,” i.e., “a problem-solving approach set within the parameters of Kant’s moral and teleological logic, to remedy contemporary problems of global justice.”²⁴ Mills’s BRK has two methodological steps: first, show that Kant’s and Kantian moral-political philosophy *exemplify* the racial contract, and second (*and only if/when political theory accounts for this historical fact of systemic oppression, without whitewashing or sanitizing the history of modernity*), try to repurpose Kantianism or liberalism for antiracist political aims.

On the one hand, we ought to recognize that Mills’s BRK is not whitewashing the history of modernity, and as such, it wants us to reckon with what I called “Kant’s nonideal theory of politics” *as well as* its effects on the ideal. I call this move “a major plot twist” for Kant Studies and contemporary Kantian-liberal political thought elsewhere.²⁵

Just like his contractarianism, then, Mills’s radical repurposing of Kantianism is once again pragmatic and extremely strategic. And of course, we should utilize any means necessary to dismantle white supremacy. But I am doubtful that Kantianism is even a necessary means for this project, or even at all necessary or a helpful means. So just like there are limits to contract discourse, I believe that there will be serious limits to Kantianism as a strategy.

For one, I remain doubtful of Mills’s claims that “Black Radical Kantianism” *can* accommodate the radically different history and structural position of Blacks in the polity and in the normative ontology of the society.²⁶ I cannot seem to imagine a reshaping of the Kantian-liberal discourse by the realities of racia-sexual oppression. It caused me additional grief to express my disagreement with Mills’s reconstructive Kantian project after his departure, until I realized that this grief is a part of my gratitude too: I try the thought experiment that is Charles

²⁴ Jasmine Gani, “The Erasure of Race: Cosmopolitanism and the Illusion of Kantian Hospitality.”

²⁵ Dilek Huseyinzadegan, Charles Mills’s BRK as a Major Plot Twist for Kant Studies and Contemporary Kantian-Liberal Political Thought.”

²⁶ Charles W. Mills, “Black Radical Kantianism,” 7.

Mills's Black Radical Kantianism and realize that the reason why I am having a hard time imagining a radical liberalism or Kantianism can also be found in Mills's work.

Mills against Mills: "White Time" and Radicalization of Kantianism-Liberalism

I took the central lesson of *The Racial Contract* to be the following: liberalism is grounded in a denial of the long and ongoing history of violence and supremacy. As such, it simply *cannot* account for the long history of white supremacy in its normative framework, *unless* we radically re-orient political philosophy by means of the idea of "the racial contract." This radical re-orientation will allow political theory to see what it could not thus far see, i.e., the truism that white supremacy as the political system that made the modern world into what it is today.

It seems as if liberalism is operating on a different timeline and different space altogether. As I was going through my files of Mills essays and handouts, I found his 2014 essay "White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory" that confirmed my intuition. Here, Mills offers his critique of Rawls that has to do with how distributive justice theories are oriented by a ahistorical or presentist (white) time and temporality. He writes that "ideal theory establishes the coordinates for a White time map in which *issues of rectificatory, the dikailogical concern most pressing for the non-White population, are literally off the map.*"²⁷ That is, the hold of the epistemic agreement that we call white ignorance is so strong, and its norms so warped, that it *de facto* has created its own (white) temporality, and this normative temporality functions by *excluding* the histories of oppression both in its mapping of reality and its prescriptions for justice. In this way, distributive justice operates according to a white normative temporality, assuming the world is metaphorically and literally flat, ignoring the "mountains" of oppression.²⁸

²⁷ Charles W. Mills, "White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory," 40.

²⁸ Charles W. Mills, "White Time," 37.

It is not so shocking, then, as he further points out here, that mainstream political philosophy in the wake of Rawls “continues to be structured by this exclusionary normative blueprint.”²⁹ For this reason, Mills concludes that “*the concepts made available to us by ideal theory cannot accommodate the real-world history* [and...] Rawls... does not provide for us with the apparatus necessary for dealing with their dikailogical implications.”³⁰

To reiterate, Mills here reminds us that reparative or restorative justice projects will require a different temporal understanding than the amnesiac white Time and the flattened world of distributive justice frameworks. Because of this, I view Kantian-Rawlsian-liberal normative framework as *theoretically incapable* of integrating a real history of structural oppression into their mapping of reality, and as such, I cannot see how this framework can be helpful for rectificatory, restorative, or reparative justice projects. For Mills taught us that the veil of white ignorance is thick, and its hold is strong: it has made the modern world what it is today.

Conclusion: “Radicalize Kant? I’d Rather Not!”

Both before and after the publication of his essay “Black Radical Kantianism” Charles and I had been arguing, in a friendly way, about whether or not Kantianism or liberalism had a place in radical liberatory political theory. In fact, when Charles left us for another frequency in September of 2021, he was co-editing a special issue for *Kantian Review*, entitled, “Radicalizing Kant?”³¹ I am grateful that he saw an early version of my reflections and responded with his usual generosity, as I detail in what follows.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Charles W. Mills, “White Time,” 38, my emphases.

³¹ The entire special issue “Radicalizing Kant?” that includes a Memorial and various contributions from Charles-inspired Kant scholars, can be found here: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/kantian-review/latest-issue>

The original title of my paper for this special issue on “Radicalizing Kant?” was “Radicalize Kant? I’d Rather Not.” At the contributors’ workshop in June 2021 via Zoom, I said that, as Mills taught us, Kant and orthodox Kantianism are *complicit* with upholding and maintaining white male supremacy. This complicity presents itself in ideal theory adaptations of Kant as an ideology of white upper class male interest, whereas Kant’s nonideal theory provides a straightforward justification of white western European male domination in the form of a political anthropology of persons and subpersons. I said that it might be radical for Kant scholars to utilize his frameworks toward purportedly radical aims like reparations, but it might not be so radical for radical theorists and activists to do so, especially because there are better and more straightforward normative tools than Kantianism out there – such as the Black Feminist Identity Politics of the *Combahee River Collective*, or *Feminism for the 99%*.³² And it is time that we take *them* up, rather than keeping Kantianism at the center of popular and mainstream discussions on global and restorative justice. I do not care about its strategic popularity, I said; Kantianism is mainstream because we keep him and liberalism in the mainstream. Surely, we can change that, I added, and I saw Charles chuckle.

I concluded my presentation by saying that we ought to read the Kantian philosophical system as one supreme instantiation of the systemic nature of global white supremacy, and this Kantianism-as-diagnostic reading might even be more productive for radical political projects. First comment or question was from Charles, who said to me: “So you would rather read *Kant as a powerful theorist of oppression?*” Indeed, I thought: If I could re-name my 2019 book now, I would name it *Kant’s Powerful Theory of Oppression*. I just enthusiastically yelled at the screen:

³²See Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*; Cinzia Aruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*.

“I learned it from you!”

He gave me two thumbs up.

That was the last time we spoke about radicalizing Kant.

Coda:

I remembered as I was writing this piece that, earlier at another SPEP meeting where I was an Assistant Professor working on conceptualizing a book on Kant and political philosophy, I mentioned to him that I am thinking about calling my book “Kant’s non-ideal theory of politics.” He paused for three seconds, completely intuited the direction of my main argument and strategic framing, and said, “Well, that will establish a Trojan Horse in Kant Studies, a back door to talk about race and racism! Cheers! What a move for a Turk to pull!” I never got this kind of support from anyone: even though he disagreed with my reading of Kant and Kantianism, he understood the kinship between our projects, how dismantling white supremacy is the common goal, and we will continue to do it by any means necessary. He also remembered our conversation from 2004 and singled out my Turkishness in his reference to the “Trojan Horse.”

His generous support of my intellectual development is what I will miss the most about Charles. And that is only part of the reason why all my future work on social and political philosophy will continue to revolve around the first sentence of *The Racial Contract* - rather than Kant or Kantianism.

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[The Charles Mills Playlist](#) (with special thanks to Linda Martín Alcoff)

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