

Make Room for Marx in Anti-racist Philosophy¹

Paul Gomberg
University of California at Davis

Anti-racist philosophy and Marxism

Anti-racist philosophy strives to assist practical struggles against racism.² Racist society puts people in racial categories. By “racist society” I mean a society where racial categorization affects people’s prospects for a long, healthy, active, and fulfilling life. When I refer to racism, I am referring to racist society.

My particular concern here is anti-black racism in the United States (US). In the US people identified as black are five times as likely to be incarcerated as people identified as white, more likely to be stopped by police, more likely to be arrested, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to be sentenced to jail or prison. These facts barely scratch the surface of the ways racial identification in racist society harms black people. Anti-racist philosophy aims to help the practical struggle to end racial harms to black people.

Anti-racist philosophy would benefit from resources of the Marxist tradition, specifically by incorporating lessons from the anti-racist struggles of the Communist Party (CP) in the United States during its peak period of anti-racist influence, 1930-1955. To give a sense of the magnitude of the CP’s influence: when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) expelled eleven communist-led unions 1949-1950, it lost over one million members (Rosswurm 1992, Levenstein 1981). The CP’s line was that anti-racism should lead working-class struggle. While the implementation of this line was uneven in communist-led unions, their achievements were remarkable. This history is nearly entirely lost to anti-racists today. I will use lessons from those struggles to criticize the anti-Marxism of two important philosophers over the past forty years, Bernard Boxill and Charles Mills.

Bernard Boxill on Marxism and race

Bernard Boxill has criticized Marxist thought more exhaustively and carefully than any other anti-racist philosopher. His subtle and sustained arguments can help us develop a better Marxist account of racial injustice and proletarian revolution—although Boxill does not see his work that way. I limit my discussion to the anti-Marxist chapter from his 1992 book *Blacks and Social Justice*.

¹ I wish to thank (the, sadly, late) Charles Mills and Rose Lenehan for comments on earlier drafts.

² Compare to Haslanger 2000.

In Chapter 3 of *Blacks and Social Justice* Boxill explains why he must engage Marxist thought: he is defending color-conscious remedies for racial injustice, but he believes

Marxists should oppose color-conscious policies both because they are urged as being just and because they are urged as being to the advantage of blacks in particular. . . . [B]ecause such policies] are not in the “common interest of the proletariat independently of nationality,” [quoting Marx here] but in the interests only of the black proletariat, they will divide the working class. (1992: 54)

Is Boxill right about what Marxists must think? Maude White was a black working-class leader of CP work in the needle trades. In New York City in 1930 nearly one-third of needle-trade workers were black and got one-third to one-half the pay of white workers for the same work. White wrote that for a communist to tolerate racial insults directed at black workers was to carry “bourgeois mentality in the heart of the working class;” tailors who excluded black workers from a union event “should be thrown out of [the union] neck and crop” (Solomon 1998: 143). For the union not to fight discrimination against black workers in the needle trades was “capitulating before the white chauvinism of the boss” (106).

In 1931 a Finnish immigrant worker CP member was tried for “white chauvinism” because he sought to discourage black people from entering a Finnish workers’ club where the CP was holding a social event. This was one of many CP trials in the early 1930s making the same point: that “white chauvinism” would not be tolerated, that it was aiding the capitalist enemy. Mark Solomon stresses that—in the fight against racism—communists did not appeal to abstract morality but to class interests, the need for class unity to defeat the bosses (146).

Still, Boxill says that Marxism does not have the resources to support the *color-conscious* policies he defends. Is he right? It would seem that, by a similar argument to those above, such policies could be a communist duty: the capitalists create inequality by discriminating against black workers; to fight that discrimination and correct it through color-conscious policies would seem to be part of the fight against capitalists. In Chicago in the late 1930s the meatpacking company Swift had discriminated in hiring against black workers; under pressure from a local of the communist-influenced Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, Swift agreed to hire black workers in a proportion that matched their share of the Chicago population (Halpern 1997: 153). In many plants communists fought for and won bacon-packaging work for black women (it had been only white women working in clean conditions). If the CP’s line in the early 30s on white chauvinism is correct, if any attack on black workers aids the capitalists and attacks the entire working class, then Marxism has the resources to fight not only against racist discrimination but also for color-conscious corrective policies as part of a fight for equality and unity within the working class. In many left-led CIO unions workers fought against job reservations for white workers—and won! Boxill is a victim of the erasure of this history.

Boxill is skeptical that workers generally—leaving aside a few dedicated communists—will embrace such class-based anti-racist appeals. Reasons for skepticism may be revealed in his discussion of Marx’s view that English workers must support Irish independence as “the sole means of hastening the revolution in England.” Marx is critical of the attitude of English workers toward the Irish, whom they see as competitors “who [lower] their standard of life.” Boxill notes that Marx implies that this belief is wrong. Boxill writes

The antagonism between English and Irish workers, Marx wrote, “is artificially kept alive and intensified—by all the means at the disposal of the ruling class. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And this class is fully aware of it.”

However, a moment’s reflection reveals that this argument is blatantly inconsistent with a fundamental point of the Marxist revolutionary theory—that the reserve army of the proletariat permits the capitalist to lower wages. For, if this is so, English workers were utterly correct in seeing Irish workers as competitors who lower their standard of living. (1992: 55)

Boxill’s argument goes from saying, correctly, that the reserve army permits *the capitalist* to lower wages to the conclusion that the Irish *workers* lower English workers’ standard of living. But capitalists are not workers. A Marxist will insist on this distinction. Capitalist society fosters conditions leading to a relative surplus population (the reserve army); the ruling class uses those conditions to pressure employed workers to accept lower wages. A Marxist will reject the inference that it is the unemployed or the more desperate or oppressed workers who are the *agents* of oppression. Marxist thought understands employed and unemployed, proletariat and reserve army, English and Irish, and, in the US context, white and black as unequally oppressed members of the same class. Workers are weak when they regard other workers—whom the capitalists oppress more or less than themselves—as their enemies; they are stronger when they reject the division and fight the unequal oppression in order to unite the working class. Boxill may reply that the distinction between capitalists and workers as causing lower wages is a distinction without a difference; he is skeptical of just such working-class unity, particularly if it involves a fight against unequal racist oppression and exploitation. Still, as we saw at Swift and elsewhere, anti-racist working-class unity is possible.

In addition to slighting workers’ anti-racist actions, Boxill doubts arguments that white workers are harmed by racial injustice. Boxill engages Michael Reich’s argument (based on a statistical survey of the 48 largest metropolitan areas in the US) in *Racial Inequality* (1981) that wage discrimination against black workers lowers wages for white workers: in areas where racial wage differentials were greater, wages for white workers were lower; where racial parity was greater, wages for white workers were higher. Reich’s argument supports a common working-class interest in opposing racial wage differentials, struggles which could unite the working class. Interestingly, Boxill ignores Reich’s evidence that racism lowers white workers’ wages. Instead he replies

But how is this conclusion compatible with the Marxist theory that a reserve army of the unemployed allows capitalists to lower wages? If that theory is correct, it follows inexorably that if whites [he means “white workers”] reduce the army of the unemployed by excluding blacks from the labor force they will then raise their wages. (57)

White workers have no such power to determine who is and who is not in the labor force; they live under the dictatorship of capital. Capitalists cultivate labor surpluses to depress wages.

Boxill writes (57), “But if racism pits white workers and capitalists against black workers, it would seem to follow that, while overcoming racism would raise black workers’ wages, it would *lower* white workers’ wages.” His reasoning, I suppose, is that the larger the group competing for jobs, the lower the wages; black people are excluded from the labor force, reducing competition among workers and therefore raising wages for the white workers that remain in the labor force. Is this how it works?

In Alabama’s coal mining district west of Birmingham when demand for coal was high and labor in short supply, bosses recruited white and black workers from the countryside, with a considerable presence of convict labor (slave labor) until 1928. There was no question of excluding anyone, since the operators could not find enough labor. When demand was slack, bosses lowered wages for all, and workers left the coal fields (particularly white workers who had more options). Convict labor continued to be used, even in slack times. When workers united and struck for higher wages and more control over their work, the operators brought in abundant black strikebreakers from agricultural districts. During the strikes of 1908 and 1921 interracial unity was achieved (black miners brought to the district as strikebreakers later becoming leading union militants). Then the operators stirred up racial fears among the wider population outside the coal district, turning them against the strikers, marshalling support for military suppression of the strikers. They never succeeded in breaking the strikers’ unity. In this way they kept wages low for white and lower yet for black workers (Letwin 1998, Kelly 2001). The bosses’ *additional* oppression and exploitation of black miners undermined conditions for white miners, who had a material need to fight racism, as many recognized.

Racial division and antagonism help capitalists to lower white workers’ wages. Historical evidence puts some flesh on the bones of Reich’s statistical argument that racial inequality harms most white workers.

Boxill is pessimistic about working-class unity based on a common class interest in anti-racist struggle. He writes quoting W. E. B. Du Bois

“No revolt of a white proletariat could be started,” he wrote “if its object was to make black workers their economic, political and social equals.” The “lowest and most fatal degree” of the suffering of black workers, Du Bois continued, comes “not from the capitalists but from fellow white workers. It is white labor that deprives the Negro of his right to vote, denies him education, denies him affiliation with trade unions. . . .” (53)

Du Bois published the words above in May 1933. He was soon heavily into the research which led to *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935), a Marxist account of the period and place, putting issues of race in the context of capitalist society and the exploitation of black and white workers by the planter class allied with northern capital. Du Bois explains how a capitalist ruling class manipulated and controlled white workers, as it terrorized black workers. Thus he is apparently disavowing some of the power he ascribed to white workers in 1933, but you would not know that from Boxill. Still even in *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois was tentative about the prospects for working-class anti-racist unity.

In “Prospect of a World without Racial Conflict” (1944) he surveyed issues of race globally. He wrote that the political power of white workers would fight to maintain jobs and wages for that group but that “we have little or no thought of colored labor, because it is disfranchised and kept in serfdom by the power of our present governments.” But he finds some opposition: “Only the Communists,” Du Bois writes, “and some of the C. I. O. unions have ignored the color line—a significant fact” (Lester 1971: 533). He finds reason for hope in the role that Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin played in supporting colonized peoples. Still the overall tone of this essay shows little hope that workers can overcome racial division.

Du Bois’s 1946 talk “Behold the Land” is decidedly more hopeful. Speaking to black southern youth he said

you have allies and allies even in the white South. First and greatest of these possible allies are the white working classes about you. The poor whites whom you have been taught to despise and who in turn have learned to fear and hate you. This must not deter you from efforts to make them understand, because in the past in their ignorance and suffering they have been led foolishly to look upon you as the cause of their distress....[T]his attitude...it has been deliberately cultivated ever since emancipation.

...[T]he working people of the South, white and black, must come to remember that their emancipation depends upon their mutual cooperation; upon their acquaintanceship with each other; upon their friendship; upon their social intermingling. Unless this happens each is going to be made the football to break the heads and hearts of the other. (581-2)

He writes that white youth of the South are caught up in the “Negro problem” and cannot escape it except by becoming liars and oppressors. He says, “Some of them, in larger and larger numbers, are bound to turn toward the truth and to recognize you as brothers and sisters, as fellow travelers toward the dawn” (582). Despite all he knew about the role that white workers had played in racist oppression, Du Bois held out a hope for a future of interracial working-class cooperation and struggle. Boxill does not introduce us to this side of Du Bois’ thought.

Boxill gives a one-sided reading of US labor history. There are many instances of white workers excluding and even attacking black workers. There were race riots in cities and lynchings in the rural South. All of this is true and must be said. But is it true, as Boxill writes, “Because it is racist, the white proletariat treats the black proletariat unfairly” (65)?

What about the CIO unions to which Du Bois referred in 1944, particularly the communist-led unions of a *million members* expelled from the CIO 1949-1950? Aren’t they part of US working-class history, and didn’t they wage anti-racist struggles which united black and white workers? Usually under communist leadership seamen, longshoremen, Local 600 auto workers at Ford’s huge Rouge plant, meatpackers and farm equipment and tobacco workers formed the fiercest anti-racist unions. They are part of the story.

Someone might think that these examples of working-class anti-racist struggles are rare exceptions. This thought likely arises from the anticommunist erasure of so much red-led struggle. My *Anti-Racism as Communism* (2024) attempts to restore some of what has been erased, but

some of what I learned is not in the book because of space limitations, particularly the anti-racism of longshore and maritime workers. Moreover, the little knowledge we have is due to a small number of labor historians who, in the 1980s when activists of this earlier generation were still alive, interviewed maritime workers, farm equipment workers, auto workers, and meatpackers. These fighters are dead now, and most of what they and many others did will never be known. Anticommunism has erased what they had to teach us.

Charles Mills on Marxism and race

This section examines Charles Mills' reasons for moving away from Marxism as he turned to anti-racist philosophy. Mills' reasons do not undermine *race-centered* Marxism, which holds that racism is central to the development of capitalism and modernity, that race and racial oppression are part of working-class formation, and that anti-racism must lead both current working-class struggle and the fight for proletarian power and communism.³

With his book *The Racial Contract* (1997) Mills became one of the most widely read philosophers of race. His early work included papers on Marx. When his interests turned to race he left a narrative of his reasons for addressing issues of race but not as a Marxist, particularly in his essay "European Specters" (2003).

Mills argues that Marx's account of capitalist society is Eurocentric, minimizing race and the colonization of darker-skinned non-Europeans. Instead it emphasizes creation of the working class from yeoman origins, abuse of labor within factories, and extraction of surplus value from labor in the process of production. Marx and Engels, in correspondence, used anti-black slurs and seem to have shared anti-black stereotypes. Engels wrote that dark-skinned colonial peoples will need the guiding hand of the European proletariat in developing toward a communist society. Mills wrote that to bring issues of race "under orthodox Marxist historical materialist categories is doubly problematic. These raceless categories do not capture and register the specificities of the experience of people of color" and were "arguably not intended by the founders to extend without qualification to this population in the first place" (2003: 153). Marx and Engels recognized capitalist social relations as creating a new system of domination and exploitation but failed to recognize race as a system of domination, oppression and exploitation, not reducible to class. This Eurocentric bias limits Marxism's usefulness.

Like Mills I believe that the racial project is at the center of modernity. However, while he focuses on expressions of racial invisibility or inferiority in philosophers' writings, I would stress that without expropriating and enslaving peoples of the Americas, without importing millions of Africans to the Americas and introducing the most modern capitalist techniques of supervision and intensification to enslaved plantation labor, capitalism does not develop.⁴ Marxist theory must become race-centered.

Moreover, Marx did take account of racial oppression in *Capital* when he wrote that slavery undermined all working-class movements and that "Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate

³ Gomberg 2024, Chapter 9.

⁴ Gomberg 2024.

itself where it is branded in a black skin” (1976 [1867]: 414). He believed the end of slavery was a precondition for movements to shorten the working day in the US. In the same section of *Capital* where Marx wrote about the dissolution of feudal relationships, he identified the brutality of slavery and colonial oppression as keys to the *genesis* of the industrial capitalist:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. (915)

And in *Capital*, at the end of Chapter XXXI, he writes

Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world. ... If money...’comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,’⁵ capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt. (925)

Marx recognized that the development of European industry rested on black slavery.

Nevertheless, racism is not central to Marx’s *economic* theory, which focuses on the *ordinary* “voluntary” exploitation of the worker. This is a distortion because, in addition to the unspeakable horrors of “primitive accumulation,” organization of domestic inequality along lines of race (or something much like race) has spread everywhere. Moreover, Marx’s account of primitive accumulation seems not to recognize the *continuing* role of brutal, legal and extra-legal expropriation with a huge racial component. The understanding expressed at the end of Chapter XXXI should be at the *center* of his economic theory; it is not.⁶

It would seem from Mills’ criticisms that he might be interested in Marxism that puts race at the center of class exploitation and oppression. But he only explores ways of understanding race that consider it apart from class. Du Bois and Oliver Cromwell Cox developed race-centered accounts of class oppression and exploitation. Mills does not consider Du Bois’ masterful *Black Reconstruction*. Of Cox he writes, “Even when the significance of race seems to be admitted, as by [Cox], where race is linked as a global formation to imperialism, it is still ultimately reduced to class” (154). He says *nothing more*. All that about the limited vision, even racism, of Marx and Engels and almost nothing about Du Bois and Cox. He does not explain what “ultimately reduced to class” means or what is wrong with it.

⁵ Marx’s footnote: Marie Angier: “Du Crédit Public.” Paris, 1842.

⁶ John Smith’s *Imperialism in the Twenty-first Century* develops a Marxist economics which puts at its center super-exploitation of “southern” workers but is not explicitly race-centered and does not link the exploitation of workers in the global “south” to the exploitation and oppression of workers who are darker in the global “north.” Smith’s effort is a start and needs to be developed.

In the rest of “European Specters” Mills argues that race is the “primary contradiction,” the central identity around which people close ranks...[and] the stable reference point for identifying the ‘them’ and ‘us’ which override all other ‘thems’ and ‘us’s’ [and] the best predictor of opinion on a myriad of public issues. Race [is] what ties the system together, and blocks progressive change. (157)

This does not contradict Marx’s view that class struggle drives social change. As Marx and Engels recognized, workers often act against their class interests, particularly when embracing national and racial antagonisms. There is no contradiction between race being the primary determinant of people’s thought and action *at a particular moment* and the view that workers’ problems will only be solved through proletarian revolution, a revolution which requires that workers battle racism. Mills is not contradicting Marx but believes he is.

Mills has an interracial view of racism, a view that distorts reality.⁷ He recognizes racial separation of neighborhoods resulting from actions of white people (1997: 75, 2003: 218); the flight of better-off black people which isolates the black poor doesn’t fit his interracial narrative (Wilson 1987). He recognizes white contempt for and aversion to black people; the same tendency (although to a lesser extent) among better-off black people toward the black poor doesn’t fit his interracial narrative. The interracial view does not fit the thousands of young people, black, white, asian, and latin people,⁸ who took to the streets to protest the killings of black youth by police in Ferguson, Baltimore and elsewhere nor the millions that marched to protest George Floyd’s murder. That model does not fit the murder of Freddie Gray in police custody, where some of the police responsible were black, nor the recent murder of Tyre Nichols in Memphis by a group of black police.

The last section of “European Specters” focuses on the United States. Quoting from *The Racial Contract*, he writes, “race is the identity around which whites have usually closed ranks” (1997: 138, 2003: 164). He writes, “white American workers have historically tended to identify themselves as white, as struggling against white capital but as retaining their own capital in whiteness by excluding blacks from unions” (165). The statement ignores the huge anti-racist, red-led industrial unions of the 1930s into the 1950s. The United Packing House Workers of America was, in the early 1950s, the largest working-class civil rights organization in the US.⁹ And, as noted, prevalence of racism among some white workers does not contradict the Marxist goal of class unity and proletarian power. Rather it sets a task for race-centered Marxism: put anti-racism at the *center* of working-class struggles, an approach that the CP in the US pioneered in red-led unions.

Mills writes

Unsurprisingly, then, it takes a black theorist—W. E. B. Du Bois [citing *Black Reconstruction*—to do the conceptual innovation necessary to point out the existence of a distinctive “wages of whiteness,” a payoff that is multidimensional in character

⁷ On interracial and non-interracial models of racism see Gomberg 2024: Chapter 7.

⁸ For my use of lower case for racial categories see Gomberg 2024: Introduction.

⁹ Gomberg 2024: Chapter 5.

and far broader than that received by Marx's European wage laborers. To begin with, they have a straightforwardly material benefit—which is part of the reply to an orthodoxy that would see race only as “ideal,” “superstructural.” ... Du Bois spoke of other benefits also: a “psychological” wage linked with the status of whiteness. (166)

Mills' citing of *Black Reconstruction* is bizarre. The phrase “the wages of whiteness” is from David Roediger, not Du Bois. Du Bois writes of a “psychological wage”: “the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage” (1972 [1935]: 700). He goes on to mention the titles of deference to poor white people and the public insults to black people. But the context is Du Bois' argument—virtually the exact opposite of Mills'—that racial divisions within the working class and the brutal exploitation and oppression of black people explain the low wages of white as well as black workers in the South. This is a classic Marxist argument.

Mills returns to criticism of the Marxist tradition in his “Reply to Critics” at the end of *Contract and Domination* (2007). He responds to the view that the *dominant* group is the capitalist class, not “white people”: “I see this as a class-reductionist Marxism that has historically been very prevalent on the white left, that is deeply wrong. ... [O]nce created, *race achieves a causal efficacy of its own*” (Pateman and Mills 2007: 261). Mills is not responding to the issue of who holds power, the capitalist class or white people. At times, borrowing from Pierre van den Berghe (1978 [1967]), Mills (1997) used the phrase “*Herrenvolk* democracy.” A *Herrenvolk* democracy would be a democracy where state power is effectively in the hands of the *demos*, or people, in this case the white (or white male) subclass of the people. The US could be thought to have become a *Herrenvolk* democracy in the Jacksonian period when the franchise was extended to all white males without property qualification (before then men generally had to own property to vote). While we will not settle the issue here, the Marxist view (also Du Bois' view in *Black Reconstruction*) is that control of the state (the military, police, courts, and major administrative posts) has never slipped from the hands of the capitalist class in the US. The emergence of universal suffrage in the US occurs in a two-party system—continuing to the present day—with both parties effectively controlled by one faction or another of the capitalist class. Where popular movements arose, for example the People's Party and Fusionists of the 1890s, which threatened the power of local ruling classes, they were suppressed by state violence and extra-state violence encouraged or allowed by the state. The capitalists have never ceded their dominant position to “white people.” Mills does not engage this criticism. To do that he would have to drop the rhetoric of class reductionism and engage in evidence-backed historical argument that the capitalists have lost power to the masses of ordinary white people.

Instead he changes the subject. He says “race achieves a causal efficacy of its own.” If this means that capitalism is racist, then race-centered Marxists (such as I) who see race as central to the way capitalist society organizes social and economic inequality will agree. Mills writes, “Race is an emergent social structure with a real causality of its own, not to be reduced to class” (2007: 262). Here again we encounter the unexplained idea of reduction. In racist societies such as the US, race is central to how class is organized. One cannot understand class formation in the US without understanding how the working class was organized, divided, and unequally oppressed through the laws and through a thousand institutional practices (bank red-lining, for example) that created and re-create racial oppression and exploitation inside capitalist social organization. Capitalism is racist. There are not two separate stories, one of class oppression and exploitation,

and another of racial exploitation and oppression. The second story is essential to the first. If you try to pull them apart you get either an account of capitalism which denies the centrality of race to the development of the modern capitalist world (Mills rightly complains of this account) or an account of race which obscures the role of the capitalist class, through its control of the state, banks, and corporations, in creating and re-creating racial oppression and exploitation.

Mills' assertion that race has a causal power of its own obscures this real issue. He says he abstracts from class to bring out the importance of race (1997: 137). But then when others (including Du Bois and Cox) insist that you cannot understand race without seeing it in the context of capitalist economic and social organization, he replies with the unexplained idea that they are "reducing race to class." Race-centered Marxism insists race is central to capitalist economic and social organization.

But don't white people benefit from racist social organization? Mills criticizes Stephen Ferguson's (2004) use of Michael Reich's (1981) book *Racial Inequality* to defend the Du Boisean thesis that racial oppression and division drive down most white workers. As we saw Reich, using regional comparison, found evidence that racial wage inequality lowered white wages. This study vindicates the argument of Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* that racial division and antagonism enable low wages for both groups.

What does Mills have to say in reply to Ferguson's use of Reich's study? He notes correctly that the study is old. More important, he points out that wealth is a far more telling indicator of material inequality than is income; moreover, racial wealth disparities (typically median white family wealth is ten to twenty times median black family wealth) are much greater and indicate more serious racial disadvantages. One might suppose, however, that Reich's argument could be remade using comparisons of wealth inequalities across different metropolitan areas: wherever black/white wealth differences are greater, absolute levels of wealth for most white people are lower.

Mills believes Reich's argument cannot be rescued. He believes the lowest wealth quintile gives the truest indication whether white *working-class* families benefit from racism. In a 2004 paper in the lowest quintile the white to black wealth ratio was reported to be greater (over 400:1) than in higher quintiles. Mills writes, "This huge differential in the bottom quintile—greater than at any other level—is *prima facie* evidence of the reality of transclass racial exploitation, and of white working class benefit from it, and a refutation of Ferguson's claim that 'white privilege is little more than a psychological sense of entitlement'" (265).¹⁰

Not so. The wealth inequalities he cites are evidence, if anything, of the opposite. Recall that the original argument was about the *regional* effects of racial inequality. What Reich proposed to do was estimate the *effect* of racial inequality by looking at regional variation: where racial inequalities were greatest, did white people (particularly working-class white people) do better or

¹⁰ A note of caution: one gets huge racial *multiplies* in the lowest quintile because many of the poorest of the poor are under water, having negative wealth; so median black wealth was \$57.

do worse compared with other regions? Mills has not given a regional comparison. So without further assumptions, it shows nothing about the effect of greater or lesser racial inequality.

Let's add an assumption: that the wealth-poorest white people and wealth-poorest black people are disproportionately southern. Then the data Mills gives would *reinforce* Reich's Du Boisean conclusion: where the ratio of white to black wealth is greatest (in the poorest, southern group of workers), white people do worse (that is, southern white people tend to be wealth-poorer), compared with white people in other regions where racial wealth disparities are less. I am not saying that this conclusion is justified from the evidence Mills gives, only that there is a better argument that this conclusion is justified than the conclusion Mills draws.

Mills says nothing to undermine the Marxist argument that, in the US, race and class must be understood together, and that racial injustice benefits the capitalist class, not the working class and not even most white workers. That does not mean that most white workers are opposed to racial injustice, only that workers can rightly see racial injustice as a weapon used by the capitalists to exploit and oppress all workers—but unequally.

While most of what I have written is critical of what Mills wrote, not all is. Mills wrongly regards the prominence of racial identity in people's self-understandings and actions as incompatible with Marxism. He minimizes, dismisses, or ignores prospects for working-class unity in struggle. He gives bad reasons for rejecting Michael Reich's evidence that racial injustice undermines the entire working class economically and harms white workers too. Finally, Mills insists correctly on the centrality of race to contemporary society, and helpfully argues that Marx's understand of capitalist economy is Eurocentric.

Conclusion: Anti-racist philosophy and race-centered Marxism

I sought to rebut the anti-Marxist arguments of Boxill and Mills because I believe that the resources of practical Marxism, particularly the anti-racism of the CP 1930-1955, can assist anti-racist struggle today. Specifically, anti-racists need to reject the common "systems of oppression" analysis in favor of an understanding that anti-racism can and must unite the working class in struggle against capitalism. The race-centered Marxism that emerges from this understanding is very different from a race-centered Marxism that focuses on the racial identities of philosophers or activists.¹¹

What is needed is race-centered Marxism, in two senses. We need to understand the global organization of labor as one that tends to place dark-complexioned workers around the world in the most dangerous, demeaned, low-paid work. We need, within any country, to understand how workers are divided by unequal exploitation and oppression and by the categories, typically racial, through which that inequality is organized. Such an understanding can assist workers in fighting and ending racism.

¹¹ For a Marxism that focuses on the identity of a philosopher see Shelby 2021.

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Author

Paul Gomberg taught at the University of Missouri – St. Louis (as a young man), was a postal worker for six years, then taught at Chicago State University for twenty-nine years as an adjunct and eventually Professor of Philosophy. He retired from CSU in 2014 and is currently Research Associate at the University of California at Davis. His book *Anti-Racism as Communism* was published by Bloomsbury in 2024. His current writing is on how morality works in small, egalitarian, acephalous forager groups and in groups that centralize authority but not force, and why decentralized social control gives way to centralization of power in a state. E-mail: pgomberg@earthlink.net



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