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Charles Mills' 'Black Radical Kantianism' as a Plot Twist for Kant Studies and Contemporary Kantian-Liberal Political Philosophy

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Abstract

This article shows that the *methodology* of Mills' 'Black Radical Kantianism' (BRK) represents a major plot twist for Kant studies as well as contemporary political philosophy utilizing Kantian ideas. BRK is no mere upgrade of Kant's or Kantian ideal theory for racial justice. Mills' methodology requires us to posit *both* that the real Kant and establishment Kantianism have been racist, sexist and Eurocentric; *and* that only by first admitting and reckoning with the compatibility of white supremacy and liberal egalitarianism can we hope to radicalize Kant or Kantianism.

Keywords: Black radical tradition; *Untermenschen*; racial contract; *Herrenvolk* democracy; Charles W. Mills; philosophy of race; racial justice; liberalism

White supremacy is the unnamed political system
that has made the modern world what it is today.
Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*

1. Introduction

Like many contemporary reappropriations of Kant's philosophy, Charles W. Mills' 'Black Radical Kantianism' (BRK) applies some Kantian ideals, specifically those of Respect (*Achtung*) and the Rule of Law (*Recht*), to historical and contemporary issues of anti-Black injustice. But if you thought that BRK is just like any other old revisionist Kantianism, you would be woefully mistaken. Mills' BRK must be read in part as the culmination of his three decades' long engagement with the question of how Kant's theory of race as well as his racism influenced his moral-legal-political philosophy. As such, it is also a part of his broader unfinished 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.¹ This project synthesizes Black nationalism, Black Marxism and Black feminism, and is grounded by a radicalized Kantian (or Rawlsian) normative conceptual apparatus (Mills 2017b: 102–3; 2018: 2). Elsewhere I

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question whether Kantian-Rawlsian liberalism offers the best strategic or normative tools available in moral and political philosophy to combat racism.² Here, I will first focus on Mills' particular *method* for adopting Kant and Kantianism for antiracist purposes. Then I will draw some lessons from it for political philosophers working with canonical normative figures and frameworks writ large.

This special issue uses a specific sense of 'radicalizing': here, we take 'radicalizing Kantianism' to mean appropriating Kantian ideas, principles, concepts or frameworks for radical political ends, or simply, to make Kant and Kantianism speak to contemporary issues of race, gender or class justice. While Mills' radicalization of Kant or his BRK undoubtedly also belongs to this category, I will argue that an important part of what makes Mills' Kantianism here *radical for Kant studies* is that it revises the progressive narrative of modernity and its attendant political cartography, which mainstream social and political philosophy, including Kant studies and contemporary neo-Kantian theory, takes for granted.

My claim is that Charles W. Mills' BRK does something methodologically and thus fundamentally different than most contemporary interpreters as well as liberal feminist or anti-racist appropriations of Kantianism. These other neo-Kantianisms almost always end up defending variations of Kant's *ideal* theory, implicitly or explicitly holding onto the strict separation or quarantining of Kant's writings. Contrary to these approaches, Mills' BRK does not simply bracket off the racism (sexism and classism) and then assimilate all previously sub- and nonpersons into the white population. For him, bracketing these things off only obfuscates the real difference that race makes. Rather, BRK transforms the significance of 'race', such that now 'we would be still working with a "Kantianism" in which race is central, but now rethought from a critical philosophy of race perspective' (Mills 2018: 10–11).

This is the major plot twist, I propose, that Mills' BRK represents for all political philosophers today. Mills' radical rethinking of Kantianism or liberalism in his BRK requires us Kant scholars – and anyone working with Kant's or Kantian philosophy today – to have a 'Copernican Revolution of a different sort' by first and foremost reckoning with our methodological complicity in the racial sanitization of Western political and philosophical thought. After all, this sanitization 'attains a peak of aprioristic absurdity in the secondary literature on Kant', as Mills points out (Mills 2014: 149). Thus, BRK asks us to get out of our comfort zones or leave aside the well-known mechanical formulas of the age when it comes to questions of race, gender, class and their intersections in Kant's and Kantian philosophy. Mills puts this best: 'The facts have to be faced, however upsetting they may be to Establishment scholarly orthodoxy' (Mills 2018: 10). The point is that, unlike straightforward distributive justice theory, rectificatory (or reparative) justice projects require this plot twist as a first step; and we ought to pivot toward the latter types of projects, given our reality, according to Mills. This is the terrain on which the question of Kant and race must be discussed from now on, with much gratitude to Charles Mills' body of work in all related fields of philosophy.

In section 2, I briefly sketch out the critical ambition of Charles W. Mills' reconstruction of liberalism or social contractarianism. Section 3 details how and why a commitment to restorative racial justice requires us to read Kant holistically, without separating the pure from the impure, the ideal from the non-ideal. In section 4, I reconstruct the main political argument of Mills' BRK to show its distinctive methodology, and section 5 works out the methodological implications of BRK for Kant

studies as well as contemporary neo-Kantian or liberal political theory. The concluding section 6 reiterates the uniqueness of Mills' methodology in BRK while remaining sceptical of its ultimate success as a theoretical strategy for combatting white supremacy.

2. From the social to the racial contract: Mills' radicalization of left liberalism and the social contract tradition

The radical methodology of BRK must be situated in the context of two focal points that Charles W. Mills establishes throughout his entire body of work on political philosophy and race, specifically in *The Racial Contract* (1997), 'Kant's *Untermenschen*' (2005a), 'Kant and Race, Redux' (2014) and 'Toward a Black Radical Liberalism' (2017b). These points are:

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.' (Mills 2018: 10)

I will take up these two points in turn and explain Mills' critical intervention in mainstream moral and political philosophy.

Mills' *radical* political philosophy as a whole self-avowedly draws from and contributes to the Black Radical Tradition.³ As such, it is dedicated to the project of naming and dismantling the myriad forms of the system of white supremacy that has made the modern world what it is today (Mills 2005a: 3). This means that for Mills racism is not a bug or a regrettable attitude of some bad apples or well-intentioned individuals, but a necessary feature of liberalism as we know it (*ibid.*). Global white supremacy, which he defines here as 'a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties', is systemic; it is not accidental.

He argues that we ought to theorize racism as 'a normative system on [*sic*] its own right, to be thought of in the same terms and in the same conceptual space as the familiar normative systems of ancient and medieval class hierarchy' (*ibid.*), and in this way, 'we (moral and political philosophers) will finally be able to map the real world of modernity' (Mills 2005a: 9–10).

Among other things, his short yet monumental 1997 book *The Racial Contract* aims at making white supremacy visible as a normative political system. Here, Mills takes up the liberal social contract tradition that was revived in the twentieth century by John Rawls, and *radicalizes* its main conceptual apparatus of a 'contract'.⁴ In juxtaposition with and as a corrective for 'an ideal social contract that explains how a just society would be formed, ruled by a moral government, and regulated by a defensible moral code' (Mills 1997: 5), Mills coins and develops the term 'the racial contract'.

The racial contract in reality refers to a series of political, moral and epistemological agreements among whites, and as such, it must be theorized as ‘an exploitation contract that creates global European economic domination and national white racial privilege’ (p. 31).

As a result of the series of implicit or explicit historical acts or ‘racial contracts’, our world today consists of variations of polities with a two-tiered system, which Mills calls, borrowing Pierre van den Berghe’s phrase, ‘*Herrenvolk* democracies’ (Mills 1997: 28; 2005a: 10). Furthermore, these real-world *Herrenvolk* democracies have functioned (and continue to do so) with 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’ (Mills 1997: 16). This means that the social contract, both in theory and its actual history, embeds the racial 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

Mills reminds us that the term ‘subpersonhood’ has long been present in Black and other radical traditions of political theory and praxis, albeit in different forms (Mills 1997: 111–13). By introducing this term to the social contract tradition, Mills’ political philosophy now demystifies, for instance, how a liberal commitment to equality can coexist with colonialism, conquest, genocide and slavery. Put briefly, there is no (conceptual or moral) contradiction between the claim that ‘All men are created equal’ and the enslavement and dispossession of Black and Indigenous people in the US, because there is an agreement that Black and Indigenous people are subpersons (*Untermenschen*), whereas only white men are full persons. The real or historical racial contracts of expropriation, dispossession, exploitation and enslavement may be implicit or explicit; in each case, however, they underwrite and support the social contract via a theory of subpersons, or *Untermenschen* (pp. 16–19).⁶

In this way, Mills defends the reality of the non-anomalous, rather *symbiotic* relation between liberalism and racism. Accordingly, when we are reading classical liberal or political theorists as if they were making race- or gender-neutral pronouncements, we are anachronistically misrepresenting them (Mills 1997: 6). That is to say that when we take their references to ‘men’ or ‘persons’ in a race- (and/or gender-) neutral way, we are in fact distorting their theoretical intentions and obfuscating how liberalism operates both in theory and praxis (Mills 1997: 10).

3. What’s Kant gotta do with it? *Untermenschen* and the ‘symbiosis thesis’

It is important for us Kant scholars to note that Mills further develops the analytic category of the ‘subperson’ and its significance for rethinking mainstream moral and political philosophy in his provocatively titled ‘Kant’s *Untermenschen*’. 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’ (Mills 2014: 138). Although Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze broke the news to philosophers about Kant and ‘the color of reason’ in the mid-1990s (Eze 1995, 1997), Kant’s writings on history, anthropology and geography have for a long time been considered minor or secondary. In this section, I will follow Mills’ lead about *Untermenschen* to take a closer look at

our methodologies for dealing with the question of race and racism in Kant's philosophy.

Emanuel Eze and Robert Bernasconi's work on the issue of race and racism in Kant's philosophy demonstrate that Immanuel Kant, one of the founding fathers of modern and contemporary ethical, moral, legal and political theory, proponent of cosmopolitanism, and the author of the sublime imperative of treating all people with dignity and respect, also founded the modern concept of race and consistently advocated a naturally and culturally grounded racial hierarchy of human beings in his writings on history, anthropology and geography (Eze 1995, 1997; Bernasconi 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2011, 2014).⁷ In Kant scholarship, it seemed to take us a very long time to engage with these findings. In response, we have developed a few standard methodologies for dealing with the question of race and racism in Kant's philosophy. Often, we offer distinctions between what is central (pure ethics or normative theory) and what is peripheral (impure ethics or applied theory) in Kant's and Kantian moral-legal-political philosophy (Louden 2000; Huseynzadegan 2019a). We say that the 'ugly', i.e. Eurocentric, racist/white supremacist and misogynist claims that we find in Kant's writings on history, anthropology and geography lack the systemic rigour of his critical philosophy. This implies that they can and must be conceptually *separated* from the pure or *a priori* principles and ideals of his philosophy.

Note, however, that this separation simultaneously presupposes and attempts to prove that Kant himself is or was fundamentally correct about how (his) philosophy must be divided: by prioritizing the *a priori* over the *a posteriori*, the pure over the impure. This begging-of-the-question and other methodological absurdities that we find in Kant studies when it comes to the question of race and racism constitute the central topic of 'Kant's *Untermenschen*'. Mills first maps out the status of this debate in Kant scholarship with impeccable detail and clarity, and he updates his accurate portrait in his 2014 'Kant and Race, Redux' and maintains his position in his 2018 'Black Radical Kantianism'.

Mills develops a rather unique response to the question of how race and racism have influenced Kant's philosophy. First, he rejects the idea that liberal egalitarianism and racism are contradictory, as I have shown. When it comes to Kantian philosophy, he also adopts what he names the 'symbiosis thesis', according to which *all* of Kant's writings, pure and impure, ideal and non-ideal, transcendental and empirical, moral and teleological, constitute a comprehensive and integrated whole. For Mills, 'Quarantining of [Kant's] racist writings is not philosophically justifiable and we do need to ask what their implications are for the conventional consensus on what Kant's theories (moral/political/teleological) are saying' (Mills 2018: 8). In brief, the *seeming* contradictions in Kant's two sets of writings (pure and impure, ideal and non-ideal) can be easily reconciled, as Mills argues, 'once we postulate that Kant was *working with a philosophical anthropology of persons and subpersons*' (ibid., my emphasis).

In my 2019 *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics*, I further develop this complementarity between the ideal theory and a philosophical anthropology, the core of Mills' 'symbiosis thesis'. In the book, I name Kant's anthropology of persons and subpersons (as well as his political history and geography) his complementary 'nonideal theory of politics' (Huseynzadegan 2019a: 1–10). I argue that Kant was a deep thinker of

history, human nature and geography, and as such, he understood how these factors contribute to political theorization. Furthermore, Kant's view of this reality is *not* occasioned by a haphazard collection of empirical data refracted through the distorting lens of his personal prejudice, as it were, but it stems from the major systematic commitment of his critical philosophy, i.e. the principle of teleology.⁸ The principle of teleology provides for Kant narratives of history's progress, cultural production and geographical interactions. These narratives specify where, under what conditions and to whom his political ideals are applicable. Thus, I conclude that Kantian normative ideals presuppose and are undergirded by a non-ideal theory of politics, i.e. a specific view of empirical reality, which we find depicted and developed in detail in Kant's writings on anthropology, history and geography (Huseyinzedegan 2019a: 8–10).

To reiterate, Mills' 'symbiosis thesis' establishes that Kant's writings on race and gender do *not* constitute an anomaly or a contradiction to his ideal principles; rather, we ought to understand the Kantian system as a 'consistent exclusivist white egalitarianism', for the norm of 'personhood' for Kant remains white and male (Mills 2005a: 23). Hence, according to Mills, there is no conceptual or practical contradiction between formulas of the categorical imperative and Kant's claims about non-white and non-male persons, once we recognize that the egalitarian assumptions and pronouncements in Kant's moral/political/teleological writings are *really* referring to the (male subset of the) superior race (i.e. whites) (Mills 2018: 8).

Both Mills and I agree with Mark Larrimore's 'integrated account of Kant's writings', according to which race (discourse) is not in contradiction to but in symbiosis with Kant's moral-political-teleological discourse, and can be shown to be what he was aiming at, even if he never finished working out the details (Mills 2014: 150). As Larrimore puts it, 'Kant did not think you could responsibly do practical philosophy without physical geography and pragmatic anthropology, and he wasn't trying to' (Larrimore 2008: 355).

According to Mills, '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, incorporates a *Herrenvolk* ethic that rationalizes and justifies the racial hegemony of the west over the rest of the world' (Mills 2014: 150; my emphasis). In response to Pauline Kleingeld's (2007) claim that there is no conceptual room for the person/subperson demarcation within the category of human, Mills points to Kant's writings on Blacks and Native Americans as clear-cut cases of inferiority, and argues for a consistent integration of his moral-political theory with his racist anthropology.⁹ He reaffirms this position in 'Black Radical Kantianism', namely,

that Kant is not committed to universality (in the sense of imputing equal moral or political standing to all humans, but rather to a bifurcated ethics in which the innate and unchanging inferior nature of white women and women of color limits them permanently to sub-person status. (Mills 2018: 10)

Building on the theoretical and methodological commitments developed in *The Racial Contract* and his earlier writings on Kant and race, Mills' radicalized Kantianism in BRK presupposes a holistic and consistent view of *all* of Kant's writings.

When we consider what has been treated as the official last word in Kant studies on whether or not Kant was a racist, namely, Kleingeld's rather curious argument that sometime in the last decade of his life Kant changed his mind about race and racism (2007),¹⁰ the methodological lessons of Mills' reading of Kant and Kantianism become even clearer.¹¹ Interestingly, Mills had anticipated the dangers of this sort of dogmatism with respect to questions about race and racism in Kant scholarship as early as in 2005; as he writes in '*Kant's Untermenschen*':

Doing an open-minded investigation into this question requires us, to a certain extent, to bracket what we *think* we know Kant's philosophy is. In other words, it will not do for defenders just to point impatiently to the work of leading Kantians and eminent scholars of Kant, or refer to standard introductory texts, encyclopaedia entries, companions, guidebooks, etc. as giving the definitive summary of Kant's views, if part of the import of the challenge is that the established (and Establishment) account of the great man's thoughts is in crucial respects just plain *wrong*. *A discipline whose boast it is, as heir to the Socratic tradition, to be willing and able to put everything into question cannot be in the business of substituting hagiography for theoretical investigation.* (Mills 2005a: 13–14; my emphases)

In Mills' view, if we want to avoid substituting a hagiography for theoretical investigation, any political philosopher working with Kant's or Kantian philosophy today explicitly needs to admit 'a Kant who, for the most of his professional life, was a racist and a supporter of slavery and colonialism, only changing his mind [*if at all*] in the last years of his life' (Mills 2014: 149).¹²

So that is what Kant's gotta do with the racial contract.

4. From *Rassenstaat* to *Rechtsstaat*: the positive project of Mills' BRK

Mills reconstructs the positive project of BRK in two parts, in the realm of ethics and in the field of political philosophy. In what follows, I solely focus on political philosophy or 'the world of *Recht*', as Mills puts it, and thus set aside the ethical project of BRK, which instrumentalizes Kantian respect (*Achtung*) for sub- and nonpersons (Mills 2018: 24).

Mills' BRK starts with an honest account of *Herrenvolk* democracies, or what Mills now terms *Rassenstaat* (as opposed to *Rechtsstaat*) in political philosophy. It challenges the liberal social contract's neutral or ideal picture of a socio-political founding upon the basis of equitable social cooperation (Mills: 2018: 26). In brief, Mills' Black radical liberalism differs from mainstream liberalism in that it '(a) recognizes white supremacy as central to the making of the United States and (more sweepingly) the modern world, and (b) seeks to *rethink the categories, crucial assumptions, and descriptive and normative frameworks of liberalism in light of that recognition*' (Mills 2017b: 203; my emphasis). As Mills reminds us:

[U]npaid black slave labor (and colonial exploitation more broadly) is a central foundation of the modern world . . . This is the actual history and set of historical injustices that are covered up in contemporary justice theory, both

american [sic] and global, above all in the white fantasy world of Rawlsianism. Hence the imperative of developing a Black radical liberalism to challenge white justice theory and its erasure of this history of hundred years of racial exploitation. (Mills 2017b: 205, my emphasis)

Responding to this imperative, BRK seeks to make Kantianism ‘sensitive to the past racist exclusions that Kant’s and other Enlightenment philosophers’ racist theorists have justified’ (Mills 2014: 126d). Heeding Arthur Ripstein’s distinction between ‘broadly Kantian political philosophy and “Kant’s political philosophy”’ (Ripstein 2009: 3) and following John Rawls in his Kantianism, Mills’ BRK takes liberties with Kant. In a word, then, BRK aims to reconcile the Black Radical Tradition with the strategically popular normative framework of liberal deontological Kantian-Rawlsianism, in order to answer the question: ‘What would a commitment to bringing about the ideal cooperative *Rechtsstaat* require in a non-ideal world where the actual polity has been exploitative and unjust *Rassenstaat*?’ (Mills 2018: 30).¹³

As I have shown, the important theoretical problem for Mills’ radical political project is *not* really Kant’s own racism, but contemporary political philosophy’s failure to *radically rethink* the Kantian (or liberal) principles in the light of a modernity structured by racial domination (Mills 2018: 3). As he writes in ‘Kant and Race, Redux’:

But I never denied that it would be possible to develop a non-racist or non-sexist ‘Kantianism’ [sic] (assuming I am right about actual Kantianism). What I am claiming is that (1) we would need to **distinguish such a theory from what has been represented as Kantianism**, and (2) we would need to **reconstruct it very differently for a world systemically structured by the denial of respect to the majority of humanity**, i.e., a world divided between (recognized) persons and persons-not-recognized-as-persons, *a moral ontology obfuscated by the official narrative associated with orthodox Kantianism*. (Mills 2014: 156, n. 64, my emphases in italics)

‘Orthodox Kantianism’ here refers to approaches that bracket questions of race and racism in Kant’s philosophy, and in this way become unable to diagnose the intimate historical linkages between white supremacy and liberalism.

While one might argue that it is more straightforward to adopt Kantian *ideal* theory for contemporary antiracist purposes, that would not be radical in the Millsian sense. As he states, ‘including Blacks and other people of color in Kant’s apparatus in a nominally race-neutral way is easily enough done’; why bother with the messy, ugly, racialized Kant?’ (Mills 2018: 6–7). Indeed, a vast majority of contemporary neo-Kantian liberal democratic political theory does just this: here, we can consider John Rawls’ ideal of social cooperation inspired by Kant’s idea of the Kingdom of Ends, or Seyla Benhabib’s adaptation of Kantian hospitality as a moral-political human right for refugees and asylum seekers – or, indeed, think of any political philosophical discourse on cosmopolitanism that criticizes and repurposes Kant and Kantianism in one way or another (Rawls 1999; Benhabib 2004, 2006).

However, these other revisionist Kantianisms are ‘Kantianisms’ *at the expense of half of what Kant said in his writings on anthropology, history and geography*. Most importantly, in their exclusive focus on Kantian *ideal* theory, they implicitly or explicitly deny and

thus continue to obscure the philosophical significance of the nonideal writings as well as their bearing on Kantian and liberal thought. As a result, most contemporary critical Kantianisms today amount to what Jasmine Gani aptly names a mere ‘upgrading’, i.e. ‘a “problem-solving” approach set within the parameters of Kant’s moral and teleological logic’, to remedy contemporary problems of global justice (Gani 2017: 445–6).¹⁴ Appeals to Kantian-liberal ideal theory proceed by ‘prioritizing concept over conception’, and in this way, as Gani shows, erase and obfuscate the history of colonialism and slavery. These upgrades wrongly and dangerously imply that global justice is an ahistorical issue, and cosmopolitanism or egalitarianism are mere ideals without a long history (Gani 2017). These reappropriations of Kantian ideal theory are also problematic in Mills’ view, because they retroactively sanitize the gendered and racial exclusions in Kant’s and Kantian philosophy, and in this way tend to portray modernity as a period ‘introducing personhood and liberal equality as the global norm, for which racism is the anomaly’ (Mills 2005a: 6).¹⁵

When contemporary retrievals of Kant and Kantianism in political philosophy only take up aspects and principles of his ideal theory, or when they pick and choose parts such as ‘The Kingdom [or *Empire!*] of Ends’ or ‘hospitality’, they are making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to account for the long *durée* of the system of white supremacy. Here, then, is a chief lesson that we can draw from Mills’ detailed analysis of white supremacy and its insidious operations: Kant scholars’ reluctance to engage with the entirety of Kant’s writings as a coherent whole blocks a genuine understanding of the role of white supremacy in contemporary political theory and praxis, thereby diminishing our chances of combatting it effectively.

More importantly for my focus on the uniqueness of Mills’ methodology here, note that the central question of BRK, perhaps the most urgent question of political philosophy today, is how to bridge the gap between the current reality of *Rassenstaat* and an ideal *Rechtsstaat*, first by acknowledging that, in the past, race- and gender-neutral appeals to *Recht* went hand in hand with a white supremacist *Rassenstaat*. In this way, Mills’ approach is radicalizing Kantianism both against the orthodox establishment of Kant studies and the official narratives of Kantian-liberalism.

In brief, Mills’ Kantianism is informed by *the perspective that understands white supremacy as a political system and orthodox Kantianism as complicit in maintaining it*. It is this complicit Kantianism, and not the mere ideal Kantianism, that is now brought to bear on the reparations for historical-structural-systemic and contemporary injustices of anti-Black racism in BRK.

5. ‘A Copernican Revolution of sorts’, or the Millsian imperative for Kant studies and Kantian-liberal political philosophers

Mills’ BRK is *reframing* how we ought to even approach the question of race and racism in Kant’s and contemporary Kantian political thought. This is the sense in which his radical rethinking of Kantianism represents a methodological reorientation, what I am calling ‘a plot twist’, for Kant scholars and Kantian political philosophers. Going forward, in order to be able to recognize and account for the centrality of the concept of white supremacy in political theory, we ought to take seriously Kant’s writings on anthropology, history and geography, i.e. his non-ideal theory of politics, in our reconceptualizations of Kantian moral and political philosophy, lest

we obscure the *real* history of modernity, one that is *not* merely characterized by the ongoing civil, moral and political progress of Europe.

To sum up, Mills' strategic adaptation of Kantianism in BRK has two essential methodological moments that work in tandem with each other: first comes a critical moment of reckoning that uncovers the real Kant and orthodox Kantianism, and then comes a reconstructive moment that fully recognizes and incorporates the first critical moment in its theorization. Mills' BRK shows first that Kant's and Kantian moral-political philosophy exemplify the racial contract of a *Rassenstaat*, and only when political theory accounts for this historical fact, without whitewashing or sanitizing this history, can we possibly try to repurpose Kantianism or liberalism for antiracist political aims.

In this sense, BRK presents a Millsian imperative for Kant studies and Kantian-liberal political philosophers going forward: do not sanitize the history of white supremacy!

As I have shown, throughout his body of work, Mills urges us political philosophers to develop better ways of naming and dismantling the myriad manifestations of the political system of white supremacy. To make visible the ugly parts of Kant's philosophy as a part and parcel of the Kantian system is to make visible white supremacy as a political system. The 'aprioristic absurdity' in the Kant literature in question, with which I began this article, stems from the tacit methodological agreement among us Kant scholars and Kantian-liberal political theorists that only the ideal or pure Kantianism can be saved, that only by focusing on the ideal or *a priori* principles of Kantianism *at the expense of Kant's non-ideal or impure theory*, can we come up with a truly egalitarian and defensible Kant, ready to be used for contemporary purposes. The danger is that when we save only the ideal or palatable parts of Kant's philosophy, we won't even look at, let alone 'see', the rest.

BRK does not revolve around Kant and Kantianism – it revolves around naming and dismantling white supremacy. It is no mere upgrade. Just as the conceptual apparatus of the racial contract radicalizes the contract tradition and liberalism, Mills' BRK radicalizes the Kantian tradition and Kant studies to come to terms with their question-begging methodological choices as well as their epistemic distortions and omissions. Understanding what makes such a revisionist project radical is especially important for us Kant scholars engaging with categories, concepts or problems of Kant's political philosophy today, for it will minimally require us to reckon and work with the entirety of Kant's thought: the good, the bad and the ugly.

Race and racism (continue to) play a world-shaping, rather than an anomalous or accidental, role in most historically influential forms of liberalism (Mills 2014: 138). When the secondary literature on Kant cannot even make space for thinking about the non-ideal Kant in close connection with, as complementing and specifying, the ideal, we are participating in obscuring this real history of liberalism. When we do not reckon with Kant on race (and I would add gender and class) and continue to read Kant's claims as race- and gender-neutral, deeming Kant's views on different races, nationalities and genders to be distasteful or regrettable but ultimately not affecting his moral and political philosophy, (it seems as if) we are doubling down on the white racial framing of political philosophy. When we cast Kant's 'ugly' claims aside, we foreclose the possibility of asking how the intersecting systems of Eurocentric, colonial and imperialist cisheteropatriarchal white supremacy have been at play in Kant's

thought in various ways; we are also missing the opportunity to more deeply investigate the historical realities of white supremacy that have been promulgated by various outlets, including Kant's and Kantian philosophy; and finally, we are wilfully ignoring how these vastly influential modes of thinking and being continue to play a role in our contemporary adaptations of Kant and Kantianism. When we keep (re) producing this kind of scholarship on Kant and Kantianism, we are contributing to what Mills named 'the peak of aprioristic absurdity in the secondary literature on Kant' (Mills 2014: 149).¹⁶

Perhaps more than any other political philosopher, Mills has explored in depth the serious and difficult philosophical questions raised by Kant's writings. If a radical anti-racist Kantianism were possible, it would do well to heed BRK's methodology, which rejects the sanitizing, whitewashing, question-begging distinctions we Kant scholars continue to make and to encourage between pure and impure or ideal and non-ideal.

6. Sceptical doubts concerning the possibility of radicalizing Kantianism

In the Conclusion of *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics*, I was optimistic about the Kantian possibilities opened up by an honest assessment and integration of his non-ideal theory; as I wrote:

[I]t is not an error to hope for a truly cosmopolitan vision of the cosmopolis if we take Kant's political history, anthropology, and geography seriously; [if we] understand[] their limits and faults so we do not replicate their Eurocentric construction, [and if we remain] mindful of the importance of developing non-ideal theories of the historical, cultural, and geographical difference alongside an ideal theory of politics. (Huseynzadegan 2019a: 168)

At that time, a radical antiracist reappropriation of the Kantian framework seemed possible to me, *if only* we were able to take into account and reckon with the ugly philosophical history, anthropology and geography that subtends his ideal theory, as Mills also advises us to do.

After reconsidering Mills' three decades long work on Kant, political philosophy and race in this article, I would now phrase my conclusion as follows: the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory of politics, while helpful for identifying Kant's Eurocentric, racist and sexist frameworks of history, culture and nature and thus not sanitizing Kant, *becomes ultimately untenable*. Kant's ideal theory, via his non-ideal theory, *is ultimately grounded* and justified by a historical narrative of European civil and political progress, a cultural narrative of commerce and industry as chief achievements of humanity, and a racialized-gendered hierarchy of human beings.

In other words, I believe that it is time that we Kant scholars and anyone working with Kantian ideas finally recognize, as Jennifer Mensch puts it, that we cannot 'plausibly defend the hard boundaries between ideal and non-ideal positions in Kant, while ensuring also that no cross-contamination from the so-called "tainted" parts has taken place'. Drawing this lesson to its logical conclusion, Mensch writes:

With the easy identification of Kant's dismissive attitude toward lazy islanders on display in central works such as 1785's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of*

Morals, or even just the casual racism at work in his discussion of humour in the third *Critique* (5: 333), a body of evidence has demonstrated that *the infection has indeed spread to even the best of Kant's works*. (Mensch 2021: 128–9; my emphasis).¹⁷

As Robert Bernasconi asked the *real Kant* to stand up (2003), Mills' BRK asks *Orthodox Kantianism* to stand up and account for its methodologies. While it may be tempting for us to think that Charles Mills absolves Kant of his racism or racial theory by adopting a version of Kantianism for racial justice, or that he provides Kantians with an antiracist alibi, I have shown that this is far from being the case. Mills' BRK demonstrates that radicalizing Kant will have to start by reckoning with the real history of modernity as created and maintained by the system of white supremacy. Or else, all future reappropriations of Kant will put forth yet another whitewashed upgrade, which only serves to further obscure and erase from our sight the world- and history-shaping role of white supremacy.

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Notes

- 1 Charles W. Mills' project remains unfinished due to his untimely departure in September 2021, as he was working with the authors on this special issue; see the Foreword to this issue of *Kantian Review*.
- 2 On the question of whether liberalism or Kantianism can be repurposed for antiracist purposes, see also Marwah 2022a; Basevich 2022b; Kirkland 2022; Valdez 2022.
- 3 On the history and fundamental concepts of the Black Radical Tradition, see also Robinson 1983; Davis 1983; Kelley 2002; Gosse 2005; Yamahtta-Taylor 2017; hooks 2012; Sawyer 2020.
- 4 Of course, I can only summarize the relevant parts of its argument here. For an excellent discussion of the argument, impact, legacy of *The Racial Contract*, see Marwah 2022a.
- 5 In 'Intersecting Contracts', Mills revises his conceptual apparatus and develops an intersectional 'racia-sexual contract', operative under the system of 'racial patriarchy'; see Mills and Pateman 2007. For a Black feminist critique of Mills' attempt to incorporate intersectionality into the racial contract, see Kathryn T. Gines (Kathryn Sophia Belle) 2017. On the problem of treating gender, race and class separately in Kant studies and liberal feminism, see Huseyinzedegan and Pascoe 2022.
- 6 For a different mapping of 'personhood' in relation to 'in/dependence' in Kant's work, see Kirkland 2022 as well as Pascoe 2022.
- 7 For a list of resources on Kant and race – updated in real time – see <https://northamericankantsociety.org/resources-on-Kant-race-and-racism>.
- 8 For an earlier iteration of the argument about the role of teleology in Kant's political philosophy, see Huseyinzedegan 2015.
- 9 For a fuller account of Mills' response to Kleingeld, see Mills 2014: 139–42.
- 10 For a historical and philosophical refutation of Kleingeld's thesis that Kant changes his mind about race in the last decade of his life, see Bernasconi 2011; see also Valdez 2017 and Lu-Adler 2022c.
- 11 Note that we (Kant scholars) sometimes analyse Kant's racially hierarchical view of human beings as a form of white cognitive dissonance; e.g. see Allais 2016. However, this argument presupposes that racism is an attribute of individual attitudes, actions or choices, and thus misunderstands the systemic or historical nature of white supremacy, underestimating how race and racism show up in myriad ways in Kant's and Kantian philosophy. As Rei Terada puts it, it is critical 'to expand the methodology of the study of race beyond attention to instances that already assume that the reader can recognize what counts as

race and racism (and therefore what counts as a reference to it), or attention that limits itself to what a period text thinks race is' (2017: 269).

12 Note that Mills remains agnostic as to whether or not Kant changed his mind about race after the 1790s; but points out that 'even if he did, it would still imply that he endorsed an integrated racist theory for most of his professional career' (Mills 2018: 8).

13 Mills' BRK sits uneasily with other appropriations of Kant's or Kantian ideal theory to contemporary problems of global, racial, gender, social justice, because it has a *nonideal* methodology that starts bottom-up from the reality of *Rassenstaat*, rather than an ideal original position that starts behind a veil of ignorance. On this, see Mills 2017c and 2017d as well as 2005b. In this sense, as Elvira Basevich (2022c) aptly puts it, Mills' BRK is a *Kantian nonideal theory of reform*.

14 For a nonideal reading of Kantian hospitality that shares Gani's criticism, see Huseyinzedegan 2019b.

15 Mills endorses the following claim about the United States by Matthew Frye Jacobson with more general validity: 'Exclusions based upon race and gender did not represent mere lacunae in an otherwise liberal philosophy of political standing; nor were the nation's exclusions simply contradictions of the democratic creed. Rather . . . these inclusions and exclusions formed an inseparable, interdependent figure and ground in the same ideological tapestry' (Jacobson 1998: 22–3).

16 On this, see also Mills 2005b.

17 On why we cannot and should not quarantine Kant's 'ugly' writings, see also Shorter-Bourhanou 2022; Lloyd 2018; Spivak 1999: 1–37; Huseyinzedegan 2018, 2022; Huseyinzedegan and Pascoe 2021, 2022; Lu-Adler 2022a.

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