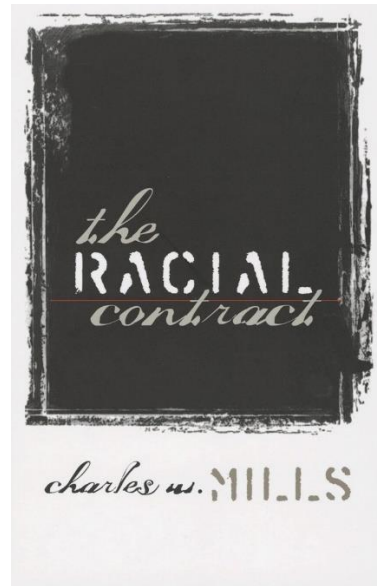


“A Provocateur from the Left”

a review by Dick Burkhardt of

The Racial Contract:

By Charles Mills (1997)



Charles Mills is an influential academic philosopher, well versed in “social contract” theory, but this book is more polemic than solid philosophy, his target being “white supremacy”. His famous opening line is “‘white supremacy’ is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today”. Thus his basic thesis is that racial animosities and practices are the driving force behind all the mal-governance of today’s world. Yet a wealth of scholarship has demonstrated that economics has always been at the root of oppression, slavery being a prime example. And in European history the Church, not race, has traditionally been at the ideological forefront of subjugation and exploitation of other peoples, the Doctrine of Discovery papal bull of 1492 being a prime example, along with the missionary vanguard during the colonial era.

Despite acknowledging such facts, Mills asserts that the racial lens is more fundamental, citing only a litany of oppressions and atrocities, not carefully reasoned argument. Nor does he ever apologize for phraseology whose meaning in popular discourse is associated with hate groups and violent anti-black racism. Thus I’ve concluded that his intention was to be a provocateur, to guilt-trip some “whites” into becoming “white renegades” or “race traitors” (p 127). But he ignores the majority who will resent the demeaning label, especially those, not just in the white underclass who’ve always been vilified, but also in the white working class who’ve suffered greater economic losses in recent decades than any minority group (note: they had more to lose, which is what counts in this era of neoliberal capitalism). Their life experiences have been that the benefits flow to the ruling classes, leaving themselves on the trash heap of history, dying “deaths of despair” (Deaton and Case), despite the purported privilege of their “white identity”.

It is the white evangelicals, far more than any other group, who’ve felt the sting of Mills’ language as “condescending elitism” (documented by Rabbi Michael Lerner). This again demonstrates the primacy of religion over race in the cultural wars and political gridlock, with the election of bigoted demagogues coming as no surprise to those of us who’ve studied this history. Thus the primary underlying dynamic has been 40 years of escalating inequality, but the actual form of the rebellion has been shaped by identity politics, especially whipped-up racial animosity, from both the Right and the Left in different ways.

But how about the book’s title, a supposed “racial contract”? Turns out that this is a hypothetical beast created by Mills, by way of analogy with the “social contract” theory of Rousseau, Locke, etc. To the extent it has any validity, the phraseology “racial regime” of some recent scholars would be far more accurate. First off, the classical theory came before the era of modern anthropology, supposing that there was a “state of nature” where humans were “free and equal” but uncivilized. Civilization supposedly happened when people adopted a “social contract” for a more modern system of governance. Of course, we now know that hunter-gatherer groups self-governed by strong codes of “mutual reciprocity”, not individual freedom. That is, survival demanded sharing, which is what yielded relative equality. Plus, it took many thousands of years to evolve modern civilization, much of it by imperial conquest and domination, not by any contract-like agreement.

Thus Mills chose a poor model for his “racial contract”. In addition, the word contract, as commonly used, implies the voluntary agreement of all parties, focusing on mutual obligations. Mills restricts the supposed contract only to the ruling classes and does not provide evidence that it was voluntary or fundamentally racial in nature. Perhaps the closest match in history would be the adoption of the US Constitution. It was ratified by the 13 colonies whose voters came from propertied households, representing majorities of their populations. These were mostly men as the traditional “head of household” and mostly white, though many colonies did permit voting by free blacks too. But it is very clear here that the primary qualification was property (usually real estate), not color, with poor workers, mostly white, being regarded as being “corruptible” instead of upright citizens. In fact, property was so important that in the Constitution that citizens holding slaves as property were given more voting power.

But mostly the racial regimes that concern Mills were simply imposed by elites, like the edicts of Kings or Popes or the later doctrines proclaimed by leaders in more democratic governments, such as Jim Crow. And

contrary to the impression left by Mills, these were not without controversy. An example is the Dred Scott decision of 1857, stating that the benefits of slavery were accepted as “an axiom in morals and as well as in politics” (p 25), though this decision was considered so outrageous by many in the North that the Civil War came just 3 years later. Thus Mills’ hypothetical contract comes across as something of a straw man.

At the end of the book Mills even admits that his “white supremacy” demon is not in fact a singularly “white” phenomenon, citing the racial doctrines of imperial Japan in World War II (p 128). Of course, the history of Chinese emperors should be cited as well. Ironically, Mills claims that his philosophy is grounded in reality, unlike that of classical philosophers, whom he accuses of “misinterpreting” the world (p 18), with some justification, by not viewing the world through racial or ethnic lenses. Yet it seems to me that flipping to the opposite, where the racial lens is dominant, leads to its own misinterpretations, with dangerous political consequences once it has escaped the academy, as it has today.