

A Tale of Two Tenths

Race, Class, and Solidarity

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This chapter tackles one of the biggest challenges to contemporary black political solidarity: *class differences among black Americans*.¹ In light of such differences, many Marxists are sharply critical of black solidarity and antiracist identity politics.² They are convinced, for example, that this form of politics, if it has any value at all, largely serves the interests of the black professional class. The black working

1. For helpful feedback on this chapter, I am grateful to the participants in the Workshop on Solidarity held at the European University in Florence in 2019 and to this volume's editors, Andrea Sangiovanni and Juri Viehoff. Versions of this chapter were presented at Dartmouth College, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Pennsylvania, and the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting, and I'm grateful for the questions and comments I received on those occasions.
2. See, for example, Adolph Reed, Jr., "Black Politics after 2016," *Nonsite* 23 (2018); Adolph Reed, Jr., "Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left," *Dialectical Anthropology* 42 (2018), 105–115; Adolph Reed, Jr., and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and Its Analytical Discontents," *Socialist Register* (2012), 149–175; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Macmillan, 2016); Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Cedric Johnson, "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now," *Catalyst* 1 (Spring 2017), 57–85.

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class would, these leftists insist, do much better to find allies among the broader multiracial working class and in the labor movement.³ Such Marxists also maintain that race-based politics wrongly subordinates class to “race” rather than viewing racism and class exploitation as inextricably related and fundamentally structured by capital-labor relations. I believe these criticisms are serious and merit a considered response. In fact, I share some of the skepticism that thinkers on the left have toward identity politics and antiracist activism. But I think they often take their criticisms too far and consequently undervalue black solidarity, which is, in my view, still absolutely vital. In an attempt to show this, I draw on some insights from W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornel West.

One limitation of this leftist critique—and the central theme of this chapter—is that it relies on a paradigm of solidarity that has its source in the Marxist theory of working-class politics. This conception generally gives too much weight to the role of shared material interests in binding a group together politically, thus ignoring other reliable sources of group cohesion. And it gives too little weight to the ethical considerations and moral virtues that sometimes dispose people to put aside narrow self-interest to act for the common good.

Let me distinguish three subgroups in the U.S. black population. The first group is similar to what Du Bois referred to as “the talented tenth.”⁴ This is the black professional class. College education, high-status occupations, and high incomes define them. These are the black doctors, lawyers, engineers, bureaucrats, executives, and small business owners. I refer to them as *black elites*. The second group is similar to what Du Bois referred to, in *The Philadelphia Negro*, as “the

3. There is a similar left black nationalist critique of the black professional class that charges this stratum with self-hate, a pathological thirst for white acceptance, and insufficient love for black peoples, particularly for the black working class and the black poor.

4. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Future of the Race*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West (New York: Vintage, 1997), 133–158.

submerged tenth.”⁵ The group is made up of those in chronic poverty. These are blacks who have very limited education and work experience, and many of whom are jobless, dependent on public assistance, have access to only dead-end jobs that pay below a living wage, or earn income through activities in the informal economy.

The majority of black Americans do not fall into either of Du Bois’s “tenths.” They are instead solidly working class and employed in the formal economy, and their situation is precarious though less dire than the marginalized black poor. But the black elite and the black poor are both relatively large, provide a stark contrast, and are often thought to be sharply at odds, making the relationship between them a good test case for the viability of black solidarity in the post-Obama era. If black elite-poor solidarity is possible, solidarity between the black professional class and the black working class should also be viable, as the division between these two segments of the black population is, overall, less antagonistic.

In speaking of the black elite and the black poor, I am referring, not to class background or origins, but to current class position. Some defenders of black solidarity deny that a serious class divide exists by calling attention to the fact that many black elites come from working-class and even poor families and that they continue to have deep ties to their poor kin. Many black elites provide regular financial support to their disadvantaged family members and go to great lengths to help them when they are in urgent need (bailing them out of jail, caring for their children, paying their rent so they won’t be evicted, providing financial loans, etc.). This has led some to conclude that most black elites must strongly identify with the black poor. But this would be a hasty inference. Solidarity with one’s poor kin does not necessarily extend to the broader black poor. And though people

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 311.

often help disadvantaged kinfolk out of a sense of familial obligation, many resent having to do so. Moreover, some black elites believe that because they were able to pull themselves out of poverty without such assistance, other blacks, including their kin, could and should do the same.

Whatever the merits of Marxist class analysis, it is evident that class position does not strictly determine a person's political commitments. Even Marx allows that "communist consciousness," while emanating primarily from the proletariat, "may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this [proletarian] class."⁶ There are black elites who are progressive, even radical, in their politics, and some have sacrificed much to advance the cause of racial justice and to help other blacks in need. Indeed, some of the harshest left-wing critics of black political solidarity are themselves members of the professional class, often holding tenured positions at elite private universities. Do they regard themselves as exceptional, that rare breed of radical that can empathize and act with the working class? If so, what accounts for their exceptionalism? If they do not regard themselves as exceptional, what justifies their belief that other black elites couldn't be brought around to a similar position?

We should also note that many among the black poor are political reactionaries and prey on and exploit other vulnerable blacks. As West rightly reminds us, "there are numerous instances of 'field negroes' with 'house negro' mentalities and 'house negroes' with 'field negro' mentalities."⁷ So although we shouldn't ignore sources of class-based tension and conflicts of interest, nor should we romanticize the political consciousness of the poor and working class.

6. See Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 193.

7. Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 25th anniversary edition (Boston: Beacon, 2017), 98.

Still, utopianism (in the bad sense) is a danger. Yes, we can't be certain of a person's politics if all we know is their class position. But there might be a strong *correlation* between class position and political commitment such that skepticism toward interclass black solidarity is warranted. We might put the question like this: Are the differences in material interests, social status, and political power between black elites and the black poor such that political solidarity between these two groups is unwise or impractical?

In *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (2005), I suggested the answer to that question is "no." In particular, I argued that black solidarity is still viable despite class division in the U.S. black population and notwithstanding the geographic separation of black elites from disadvantaged black communities (sometimes called "ghettos"). I must confess, though, that I am not confident about this. But nor am I fully persuaded by Marxist critiques of black solidarity. So, here I return to the subject.

I will consider seven challenges to the viability of black solidarity. Some are old, dating back to the early twentieth century. Some are more recent, with roots in the Civil Rights/Black Power era. And some are new, coming in the wake of Barack Obama's presidency.

CHALLENGE 1: BLACK ELITES DON'T BENEFIT FROM MAINTAINING SOLIDARITY WITH OTHER BLACKS

Some argue that it is not in the interests of black elites to commit to black solidarity or to push a racial justice agenda. Black professionals, despite the odds, have managed to succeed in the highly stratified and competitive U.S. social order and are largely insulated from the most burdensome or lethal forms of racial injustice. They live comfortable lives, often in integrated communities, and enjoy considerable

social status. They get along reasonably well with other white elites and have been largely incorporated into the mainstream of American society. And they are keenly aware that “playing the race card” (or even proudly asserting “Black Lives Matter”) tends to alienate, and even anger, many of their white peers and that most whites regard black solidarity as unjustified and possibly even racist.

To be sure, black elites are sometimes subjected to racial insults and slights (sometimes called “micro-aggressions”), and racial bias might cost some a recognition, reward, promotion, or job opportunity. But, in the wider scheme of things, these are minor inconveniences and temporary setbacks in an otherwise good and prosperous life. And, all things considered, black elites may be better off downplaying racial issues than joining fellow blacks in militant modes of resistance.

To address this challenge, we first need a working conception of solidarity. What characteristics must a group of people exhibit to be correctly said to have “solidarity”? I believe solidarity has five core components:

1. *Mutual identification*: group members openly empathize and publicly identify with one another other.
2. *Special concern*: members come to the aid of others in the group (especially to the aid of the worst off among them), even if this might call for some personal sacrifice.
3. *Common values or goals*: a set values or objectives are widely shared in the group and known to be widely shared.
4. *Loyalty*: group members stick by one another and abstain from actions that would undermine the group’s basic aims.
5. *Trust*: group members are confident that others within the group are doing, or will do, their part to defend the group’s values and to advance its fundamental goals.

These five elements comprise a type of *commitment*, one that an individual may undertake or refuse. This commitment is a pledge or vow—a way of sincerely binding oneself to others in a cause. Having made such a pledge, one's fellows in solidarity (“comrades,” we might call them) may rightfully hold one accountable. Solidarity has the same normative structure whether the cause is racial justice, gender justice, or economic justice.

Among the moral duties we are all bound by is the *duty of justice*. This is the duty to support just social arrangements and to help bring about social justice where it fails to exist. If an individual seeks to correct a structural injustice, they will, typically, need to do so in concert with others. Because such efforts almost always face strong opposition, it is generally useful, and sometimes essential, for those most directly burdened by the injustice to form bonds of solidarity among themselves. The fundamental purposes for which these bonds are formed are to advance the cause of justice, to defend group members against unjust treatment, and to provide in-group mutual support.

Third-party bystanders can of course sometimes make good comrades, and there may even be members of the dominant group who will defect and come over to the side of the oppressed. Yet, the most trustworthy and loyal allies will often be drawn from the oppressed group itself, given their obvious personal stake in the liberatory effort and their mutual understanding born of the shared experience of subordination. I contend that the duty of justice is the *normative* ground of black political solidarity. It is the fundamental principle from which the claims of solidarity are derived. It is the primary reason why blacks can be justified in making the mutual commitment of solidarity to one another.

Some may value or seek solidarity with others because of its intrinsic merits (e.g., because of the sense of community it provides).⁸ However, it is perfectly legitimate to embrace or seek it, at

8. For more on this point, see Lawrence Blum, “Three Kinds of Race-Related Solidarity,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38 (2007): 53–72.

least initially, because of its *extrinsic* value (for instance, because it may help in resistance to injustice). In light of solidarity's value as a tool for correcting or mitigating injustice, it is rational for one to commit oneself to solidarity with others (provided that others similarly situated are willing to reciprocate) and thereby to be bound by its norms.

I do not believe (as some black nationalists do) that blacks have a fundamental duty to form and sustain political unity. Black solidarity in the pursuit of racial justice is, however, a *morally permissible* and *sometimes effective* way to carry out the duty of justice. When one undertakes this commitment of solidarity, one thereby commits oneself to in-group obligations of loyalty, special concern, and mutual trust. Although black solidarity may not be the only way to fulfill the duty of justice, it is an approach that has proved valuable in earlier struggles against slavery and Jim Crow.

In *Race Matters* (1993), West doesn't often use the language of "solidarity." He writes instead about a "politics of conversion" and a "love ethic." A politics of conversion is similar to a pledge or vow in that it calls for the converted to sincerely accept that there is hope for fundamental change and meaning in collective struggle to achieve justice. This political conversion is maintained through a love ethic, which goes beyond a commitment to a shared conception of justice. This ethic, he explains, is about cultivating and sustaining agency in the oppressed by keeping alive the memory of past achievement and successful resistance and by affirming the humanity of the downtrodden.⁹ Those who fully embody this love ethic have self-respect, courage, and integrity.

Whether one uses the language of solidarity or love ethic, the thing to notice is the role of *moral commitment* and *individual virtue* in creating and sustaining meaningful collective resistance to

9. West, *Race Matters*, 19, 37.

oppression. If a member of the black elite acts politically *solely* out of self-interest, then either they don't understand what solidarity involves or they reject its requirements. It may be that, from a strictly cost-benefit standpoint, the personal costs or risks to many black elites of openly fighting anti-black racism, racial inequality, and black poverty outweigh the personal benefits of participating in the collective effort. However, if black elites are so unprincipled and selfish that they are willing to compromise with racial injustice to protect their relative privilege, then a solidarity that includes them would be ineffective or worse.

On the account of solidarity I defend, self-interest is, at best, only a *supporting* reason to commit to solidarity. Such interests cannot do their work alone—that is, apart from ethical considerations or moral motivation. Although black people share many important interests, their interests are not entirely aligned. Even where there are interests in common, free-riding on the sacrifices of others would inevitably occur in the absence of loyalty to the group and its cause.

I don't doubt that openly condemning racial injustice increases white racial resentment and hostility toward blacks. However, on grounds of justice, integrity, and self-respect, black elites should not accommodate themselves to these sentiments. Insofar as black elites are moved by considerations of justice and their identification with other blacks, consideration of self-interest can supply a secondary reason to contribute to the group's historical struggle against racial domination.

There is, ultimately, no philosophical solution to this challenge. The most that philosophers can do is to explain why there are *good practical reasons*, moral and prudential, for blacks to cultivate and maintain solidarity despite existing class cleavages. The viability of black solidarity, across class lines, turns on whether there are a sufficient number of black elites willing to carry the collective project forward even if this would involve some personal sacrifices or risks.

CHALLENGE 2: BLACK SOLIDARITY IS A FORM OF “IDENTITY POLITICS” THAT REIFIES “RACE” AND ROMANTICIZES SO-CALLED BLACKNESS AND THEREBY OBSCURES CLASS DIFFERENTIATION AND DIVERGENT INTERESTS AMONG BLACKS

Many who call for “black unity” uncritically rely on the dubious race concept when doing so. They fail to appreciate that there are no races but only a distorting racial ideology that legitimizes material inequality and economic exploitation by infusing social meaning into superficial physical traits. Race-thinking makes “blackness” (like “whiteness”) seem magical, like a necessary feature of a meaningful and valuable life. Those in the thrall of “blackness” downplay differences among blacks, exaggerate differences between blacks and whites, and aggressively guard the boundaries of black identity. These dynamics generate an unhealthy in-group conformity and silence dissent from a presumed (though largely illusory) group consensus. And, given the centrality of “race,” racism becomes the singular focus of political energy, marginalizing the significance of other forms of injustice, particularly those arising from political economy.

To respond to this set of concerns, we first need clarity about the “black” in “black solidarity” and the relation of blackness to “race” and identity. The five elements of solidarity previously outlined—mutual identification, special concern, common values/goals, group loyalty, and mutual trust—constitute solidarity’s general *form*. All robust kinds of group solidarity, including working-class unity, have these characteristics. We can distinguish different types of solidarity by two things: (1) the criteria used for determining membership in the group; and (2) the specific values or goals to which these

members jointly commit themselves. These two features constitute the *content* of solidarity.

So who is “black” for purposes of black solidarity? It is helpful to distinguish thin from thick blackness. *Thin blackness* is a category within a historically specific and socially imposed classification scheme. One needn’t believe in races as biological kinds to accept that there is such a social system of classification and that this classificatory scheme has practical consequences for those who fall under it. The category “black” serves to mark off a set of individuals within the United States on the basis of their having sub-Saharan African ancestry and sharing certain visible, inherited physical characteristics (chiefly dark skin and tightly coiled hair). Thin blackness is an indelible mark, a salient social fact, and generally carries social stigma. A person cannot choose whether to be black or to stay black in the thin sense.

Thick blackness, on the other hand, is a social identity—say, an ethnic or a cultural identity—that can be adopted, altered, or lost. It is often embraced as a *positive* dimension of a person’s self-concept. Black identities are generally components of a conception of the fundamental aims of human life. Given a thick conception of blackness, it can make sense to encourage someone to “stay black” or to hold firmly to their black heritage. It can also be coherent (though not necessarily fully justified) to say that, though someone is unambiguously black in the thin sense (i.e., clearly satisfies conventional ascriptive criteria for the racial classification), they aren’t “really” black (that is to say, don’t exhibit or subscribe to our favored conception of thick blackness).¹⁰

The thin/thick distinction is meant to distinguish the unchosen aspects of blackness from those dimensions that are subject to

10. Some disputes over who is “really” black are best understood as disagreements about what the relevant ascriptive criteria are or about whether a particular person satisfies the criteria.

individual will. The distinction is not meant to deny that unchosen factors—whether biological or cultural—shape who we are. Not only is racial classification a matter of birth, many of us have been or will be socialized into a practice of cultural blackness. We can't change these facts about ourselves. What we can do, though, is decide what significance we will attach to these facts, and in particular we can choose whether to positively identify with and thus affirm our blackness as a component of our self-concept and ongoing conscious practice, even if we sometimes unwittingly or involuntarily exhibit its hallmarks.

I have argued that blacks, in the thin sense, should *not* demand a shared thick black identity as a condition of solidarity. Nor should blacks treat the conservation or valorization of thick blackness as a defining element of black solidarity. This does *not* mean that blacks must abandon all recognizable genres of thick blackness if they are to share bonds of solidarity. Nor does it mean that those who choose to celebrate their thick blackness cannot draw on their identity as a source of strength or inspiration in the fight for justice. And I am emphatically *not* saying that thin blackness and the stigma it carries is all there is to being black.

I would, however, urge greater *tolerance* toward different views about the meaning and value of thick blackness. And, perhaps more controversially, I believe that such tolerance should be extended even to those who, though thinly black, reject all modes of blackness as defining their positive sense of self. The criteria for thin blackness is all that is needed to determine group membership; and thick blackness should not be a requirement for full standing in the group.

Moreover, the category of thin blackness is all that is needed to enforce antidiscrimination law, because the targets of anti-black racism are those who are thinly black, where this thin blackness is a putative sign of inferiority, a mark of a supposedly deeper difference. In this way, we emphasize the link between the *criteria* for who is black

with the *point* of black political solidarity, which is to resist and possibly end racial injustice. The attribution of thin blackness makes all blacks vulnerable to racism and thus makes the common experience of racial mistreatment possible. It is this common *experience*, not thin blackness, that generates spontaneous black bonds.

The precise content of black solidarity is defined, not only by its criteria for group membership, but also by its *specific aims and values*. This content has appropriately shifted with historical circumstances. In past eras, blacks have focused their energies on ending slavery, Jim Crow, and ghettoization and on fighting racism and discrimination generally. In the current era, blacks are still faced with many challenges, some old, some new. There is continuing discrimination in housing, lending, employment, and law enforcement. There is a wide range of troubling racial disparities (e.g., in wealth, educational opportunity and educational achievement, access to health care and health outcomes, and employment and incarceration rates), which are, in part, a legacy of the racial subordination and exploitation of past eras. There is the persistence of ghetto poverty and its associated ills—teenage pregnancy, joblessness, high drop-out rates, unstable families, crime, and mass incarceration.

There are also deep in-group cleavages, not only along the lines of class, but also along the lines of gender, sexuality, generation, and national origin. And there is a general social climate within the United States in which most people, even many who are ostensibly committed to racial equality and antiracism, are simply tired of hearing about black people's grievances and problems—which we might call “race fatigue”—and are now inclined to believe that blacks continue to lag behind whites largely because of self-defeating attitudes and a refusal to take advantage of existing opportunities. Any attempt to specify the appropriate content for contemporary black solidarity must take into account these and other social factors that define the post-civil rights era in the United States.

In view of the circumstances that blacks currently face, I suggest that the content of black solidarity be defined in terms of a joint commitment to antiracist values and to the goals of reducing racial disparities and ending ghetto poverty. In a phrase, black solidarity in the post-Jim Crow era should be fundamentally about advancing a racial justice and antipoverty agenda.

I conceive of “black interests,” within the context of group solidarity, as interests for which it is reasonable to expect all blacks to commit to advancing and that blacks share because they are black. Because the duty of justice is binding on all, it is reasonable to expect blacks (and those who aren’t black) to do their part to correct ongoing racial injustices and to remedy harms due to past race-based wrongs. Because they are black (in the thin sense), all blacks have a tangible and durable self-interest in ending racial injustice, especially those forms rooted in anti-black prejudice and bias. Thus, it is rational (in the instrumental sense) for blacks to support a joint effort to further this cause, provided they have reason to believe this cooperative venture has some prospects for success.

It is undoubtedly true that not every racist idea or type of racial injustice affects all blacks. And among the forms of racism that do affect all blacks, they obviously do not affect all blacks in the same way or equally. Moreover, there are racist stereotypes that target specific black subgroups rather than all blacks (e.g., the stereotype of the poor black female welfare cheat or the stereotype of the young black male criminal). However, the widespread assumption that blacks are intellectually inferior, lazy, and prone to violence certainly affects all blacks *negatively* even if it does so in different ways. And the stereotype of the young black male criminal can negatively affect blacks that are not young or male.¹¹

11. See Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

The specific political content of black solidarity is now, and has always been, *contested* among blacks. Such disagreement, which is often deep, is not simply about which *strategies* would be best (something to be expected within any solidarity group) but also about *basic values and ultimate aims*. Not all blacks have the same conception of social justice, not even of racial justice, and blacks disagree about the degree to which racial injustice remains a problem and about the underlying causes of black disadvantage. These facts should neither surprise nor alarm us. After all, blacks are a *people*, not a political party. There is no official political platform, nor could there be. And no one should expect blacks to subscribe to the same political philosophy. Still, I think that blacks do have interests that converge around the agenda I've outlined and that there is a stable consensus on these fundamental values and goals, which largely cuts across ideological differences.¹² Black solidarity can, and should, be maintained despite these inevitable disagreements about ideals, objectives, and strategy.

There is nothing in this account that precludes or discourages debate about the specific values and goals that should underpin black solidarity. Even the black consensus—what in my book I call the “implicit black constitution”—is not immune to revision or amendment. In fact, it has changed over time in response to debate and altered circumstances. I do however believe that we should be slow

12. Though few in number, there are black conservatives who believe that racial justice has already been achieved and that continuing black disadvantage is the result of some combination of blacks' self-defeating attitudes and behavior and of an overly generous welfare state predicated on white liberal guilt. Since black solidarity is rooted in opposition to what is taken to be an unjust social order, black conservatives will naturally refuse to join the effort, and black progressives (from liberals to radicals) will have little reason to regard black conservatives as reliable allies. The two sides may, however, sometimes agree to support specific social service programs or in-group self-help initiatives. For comparative research on black conservative political attitudes, see Andrea Y. Simpson, *The Tie That Binds: Identity and Political Attitudes in the Post-Civil Rights Generation* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 281–313.

to make changes and that the burden of proof should be on those who propose such changes. Why? Two reasons.

First, these consensus values and goals (and not “race” or “identity”) are the glue that holds the group together, and this group cohesion (when accompanied by sufficient numbers) is the primary source of the group’s political power and efficacy. I am not saying that blacks, as a collective, would be powerless without black solidarity—multiracial coalitions and *modus vivendi* black politics are still available. But I think it is fair to say that a black politics that eschews black solidarity would be needlessly discarding what historically has been the group’s greatest weapon of self-defense and group advancement.

Second, as blacks debate what values and goals they should be committed to in the post-Jim Crow era, they should not regard themselves as starting from scratch. There has been a long, black debate over many generations about how to respond to white domination and its consequences. Through this historical debate blacks have forged their current political consensus. At the risk of sounding like a Burkean conservative, I believe there is *wisdom* in these traditional black ideas. There is, no doubt, error too, some of which I sought to expose and correct in my book. But ultimately, my goal is to draw out and defend the essential truths of black political common sense.

Without common values and goals, we cannot make sense of group loyalty and mutual trust, which are partly constitutive of solidarity. Loyalty and trustworthiness are to be judged by fidelity to group values and goals. The traitor or “sell-out” is the person who fails to be faithful to the group’s values and goals. And I think most blacks have a rough sense of what these values and goals entail even if they disagree about their precise content. My aim in identifying and defending these shared values and goals is rooted in the objective of demonstrating the cogency and viability of black solidarity in the face of skepticism, not in a desire to provide indubitable foundations

for black political practice or to prevent debate about the content of black solidarity.

Blacks could of course jointly commit themselves to promoting a social justice agenda far beyond racial justice and antipoverty—and by all means should. But for a variety of reasons that I explain in *We Who Are Dark*, such a *joint* commitment to a broad progressive agenda is unlikely to form among blacks. We simply cannot expect that kind of political cohesiveness within such a diverse and internally stratified population. I still think a progressive form of black solidarity is possible and desirable, but I don't want to downplay or ignore its limits.

CHALLENGE 3: BLACK ELITES GENERALLY HAVE CONTEMPT FOR THE BLACK POOR OR, AT BEST, ACT ON THE BASIS OF PATERNALISTIC NOBLESSE OBLIGE

Many black elites don't identify with the black poor. Indeed, many abhor (what they take to be) the black poor's habits, attitudes, and lifestyle. They believe that poor blacks tend to have self-defeating values, behave irresponsibly, and fail to take advantage of available opportunities. The result, they feel, is that the race looks bad, stereotypes are reinforced, and therefore black identities are further stigmatized and black lives are devalued. Moreover, black elites often resent the fact that "ghetto" modes of blackness are viewed in the wider society as representative of black life. So they seek to distance themselves from poor black people or support measures that aim to make the black poor conform to "mainstream" values. From the point of view of the black poor, this stance is naturally unacceptable and insulting, thus making fruitful solidarity infeasible.

Even if these moral criticisms of the black poor have merit, the *social structure* that poor blacks have inherited and confront is manifestly

unfair. Moreover, the black poor, like many other blacks, are burdened by the legacy of past racial injustices. Thus, even if the black poor could do more to help themselves, as a matter of simple justice they are nonetheless entitled to good schools, better job opportunities, decent housing, and a fair criminal justice system. Disapproval of the choices that poor blacks make in response to their unfair circumstances does not justify abstaining from actions that would improve the circumstances—the unjust social structure—they face.

It is well known that class differences correlate strongly with differences in lifestyle and tastes. Blacks are not immune to this. But I see no reason to suppose that blacks must have a similar lifestyle or approve of one another's lifestyles to share a commitment to fight racial injustice. Blacks can respect (or at least tolerate) diverse ways of living as a black person while working together to remove unfair burdens that group members face.

Moreover, blacks don't have to love each other to have solidarity. Now here West might disagree. Much will depend on whether feelings of affection and affinity are necessary components of his proposed love ethic. West does tell us that a love ethic is *not* a matter of "sentimental feelings" or tribal allegiance.¹³ Here I read him as following King, whose love ethic is not a matter of passion but of mutual respect and empathy. But West also emphasizes, and praises, the fact that Malcolm X's love for black people was not "abstract" but passionate and concrete—which partially explains why he remains a revered figure among black Americans.

The commitment of solidarity should, I think, be distinguished from the *feeling* of solidarity and also from *liking* those with whom one has solidarity. The commitment can of course be accompanied or prompted by feelings of affection or affinity toward fellow members of the group. And it is entirely appropriate to have such feelings toward

13. West, *Race Matters*, 18.

one's comrades. But these feelings are *not* the foundation of solidarity. Such positive sentiments are neither necessary nor sufficient: one can be steadfast in one's commitment and yet lack the feelings; and one can possess the feelings without undertaking or honoring the commitment.

In addition, the feeling of solidarity is often a spontaneous emotional response and not an act of will. But the commitment that often springs from such sentiments need not be unreflective and is never involuntary. Those with the feeling of solidarity—just like those who fall in love—must still decide whether, when, and how to act on this sentiment. Feelings of affection and affinity can no doubt create greater cohesion within a group. And such sentiments can be a powerful motivating force when the going gets tough. But solidarity is, ultimately, an ethical commitment.

Some might concede that feelings of solidarity are not sufficient for sustained collective resistance but insist that such feelings are *necessary*. Our will is too weak to remain steadfast in their absence, they might say. Yet here the comparison with working-class unity is instructive. Marx insisted that *solidarity* is the fundamental principle of the labor movement, and he thought such solidarity can and must bind together workers of different countries.¹⁴ This kind of solidarity could certainly rest on common values and objectives, the common experience of oppression, and perhaps shared enemies. It could not, however, rest on feelings of affection and affinity, given how large and diverse the international working class is. It would not therefore be fair for Marxists to fault black solidarity for failing to possess virtues that working-class solidarity is incapable of exhibiting.

14. In a speech delivered in Amsterdam on September 8, 1872, at a congress of the International Working Men's Association, Marx says, "Citizens, let us think of the basic principle of the International: Solidarity. Only when we have established this life-giving principle on a sound basis among the numerous workers of all countries will we attain the great final goal which we have set ourselves." See Karl Marx, "The Possibility of Non-Violent Revolution," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 524.

CHALLENGE 4: BLACK ELITES CARE ABOUT RACISM BUT DON'T HAVE A STAKE IN ENDING BLACK POVERTY

It might be thought that although black elites have a vested interest in defending civil rights, preserving affirmative action, and enforcing antidiscrimination laws, they do not have a stake in ending black poverty and its associated ills. After all, black elites are no longer forced to live in segregated poor neighborhoods and are not relegated to the low-skilled labor market. They do not depend on public assistance to meet their basic needs. Their highly valued and scarce skills, which enable them to get high-paying jobs, protect them from the precarious lives of the black poor. Though black elites may empathize with the plight of the black poor, there is little reason to believe that they are invested in actively fighting poverty.

Conversely, the black poor are primarily concerned with “bread and butter issues.” They need to acquire jobs that pay a living wage and to find affordable housing in safe neighborhoods. They need decent schools for their children and basic public services. They need access to inexpensive and efficient public transportation. They feel they are facing a police state that is highly punitive and violent toward the black poor. And the most dangerous stereotypes target the black urban poor, not blacks in general. Black elites and the black poor are not therefore having the same “black experience.” In light of these differences in interests and priorities, it is not realistic to expect solidarity that cuts across this vast class divide.

The existence of black slums, the achievement gap in education, high black jobless rates, and racialized mass incarceration are all, in the minds of many, conspicuous confirmation of familiar negative black stereotypes—that blacks are unintelligent, lazy, irresponsible, imprudent, and violent. Those in the grip of these stereotypes are often disposed to

interpret these disturbing racial disparities, not as a sign that there are further racial injustices to address, but as empirical support for their low opinion of blacks and as justification for their resistance to policies that might create greater racial equality. Therefore, sharply reducing these disparities and eradicating ghetto poverty *is* in the interests of black elites.

If black identities are stigmatized because of their association with intellectual inferiority, indolence, irresponsibility, folly, and crime—as they clearly are—then black elites have a stake in breaking that association. As Du Bois often lamented, the black population in America is generally judged by the behavior and condition of its most debased members, and the condition of the worst-off is treated as a sign of the inferiority of blacks as a whole. Moreover, the black elite (or at least some of their kin) are sometimes *mistaken* for members of the black poor and mistreated as a result. This can have deadly consequences for advantaged blacks when the abuse comes at the hands of the police. Such facts give black elites a practical reason to be personally invested in the eradication of ghetto poverty.

However, quite apart from their personal stake in eliminating black urban poverty, black elites should, on grounds of solidarity, do their part to alleviate the burdens of the black poor. Recall that solidarity entails special concern—a commitment to aid one's comrades in need even if in doing so one receives no reciprocal benefit. It would be utopian and impractical to expect broad-based solidarity in the absence of shared interests. To be sure, there will always be some heroic and self-sacrificing individuals who will commit to solidarity with others in the cause of justice despite having little if anything to gain personally. But most of us are not moral heroes. We often need incentives to live up fully to our political commitments. In the absence of a personal stake in the outcome of a political struggle, we can find ourselves without the will to contribute much to the fight. But, as I have emphasized, it would also be a mistake to attempt to ground solidarity solely in shared interests.

CHALLENGE 5: BLACK ELITES HAVE AN INCENTIVE TO PAY LIP SERVICE TO BLACK UNITY BUT THEN SUPPORT POLITICAL MEASURES THAT ADVANCE THEIR NARROW CLASS INTERESTS

Many black elites do take pride in being black and don't like being regarded as "uncle toms" or sell-outs. They resent having their blackness questioned, and they know that poor blacks often view them with suspicion if not disdain. Insofar as they value their black identity and affiliation with other blacks, they have an incentive to *appear* to support the most disadvantaged in the group whether or not they actually have this commitment.

They may say all the right things in public, using the familiar rhetoric and tropes of black political culture, and express their blackness through recognized cultural markers and consumption patterns while actually supporting policies that favor the affluent. West makes a similar point about the public performance of black anger and appeals to black sentimentality and nostalgia.¹⁵ Recognition of the divergent interests between black elites and the black poor might lead the latter to reasonably wonder whether they can actually trust black elites. The interests of the two groups might be thought to diverge so sharply that the black poor are rightly concerned that black elites, despite their professed commitment to group solidarity, will not care enough about the needs and priorities of the worst off in the group.

This question turns on whether we have reason to believe that black elites, in virtue of their relative privilege, have an insincere or a weak commitment to black solidarity such that when asked to sacrifice

15. West, *Race Matters*, 38.

or risk some of their advantages, they will betray their downtrodden brothers and sisters. This problem is real. The right response to it, though, is not to write off all black elites as untrustworthy. Rather, given these legitimate concerns, the black poor should demand some positive signs of good faith, trusting only those black elites with a demonstrated commitment to racial equality, rather than giving every black elite that avows solidarity the benefit of the doubt. Less weight should be given to ethno-cultural signs of blackness when it comes to determining who is a good comrade. More weight should be placed on concrete evidence that would-be allies are committed to advancing the cause of racial justice and reducing black poverty.

King considered this problem. He argued that nonviolent direct action erases class distinctions by making all sectors of the community vulnerable to being convicted on public order violations and perhaps sharing a jail cell. His general point could be extended to calling on black elites to share the same neighborhoods and schools with the black poor.

CHALLENGE 6: BLACK ELITES VIEW THE WORLD THROUGH A NEOLIBERAL LENS

Many now understand freedom and fairness as no more than economic mobility using market mechanisms uninhibited by discrimination. In light of this, some Marxists argue that black elites regard the social conditions that would advance *their* interests as identical with the conditions that would advance the interests of the black population as a whole. Too often, black elites view their own

individual successes as victories for the group and as positive signs of racial progress. In other words, black elites have a systematic class bias in their political perspective. Regardless of their level of goodwill and commitment to the black cause, this bias distorts their judgment about what would be best for the black poor.

I would not deny that there is such bias. However, provided blacks do not tie their solidarity to a Du Boisian talented tenth doctrine, this bias need not undermine solidarity. Instead of elite-driven politics, there should be no presumption that elites are the “natural leaders” of the collective effort or that elites should set the group’s agenda. As West emphasizes throughout *Race Matters*, black politics, like all politics, should be rooted firmly in critical dialogue and democratic accountability, where all participants, regardless of class, have equal standing. Those persons who are chosen to lead various initiatives should be responsive to the criticisms of those they expect to follow them; and those who choose to follow others’ lead should submit these leaders’ political proposals to close scrutiny, checking not only for conflicts of interest and bias, but making sure that these proposals treat the interests of all segments of the group as equally important.

The threat of elite bias could be significantly mitigated through the mechanisms of a black counter-public, where issues that affect the group are openly debated and the voices of the marginalized are not silenced or ignored. Yet, the democratic ethos among blacks is not currently as robust as it could or needs to be. And the suppression of open black debate—sometimes by black elites themselves—that occurred during the Obama years may have done lasting damage.

CHALLENGE 7: GIVEN THE DIVIDED ALLEGIANCES OF THE BLACK ELITE, THE BLACK POOR (WHO ARE REALLY MEMBERS OF THE WORKING CLASS) SHOULD SIMPLY MAKE COMMON CAUSE WITH WORKERS OF OTHER RACIAL GROUPS

To secure the interests of the black poor, a radical transformation of society needs to occur. Although black elites oppose racial discrimination, they have an obvious stake in preserving the *economic* status quo—that is, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few (and the power that comes with it), low taxes on high-income earners, and great income inequality, where the benefits of economic growth go largely to investors and the professional-managerial classes. Moreover, as West points out, black elites' preoccupation with white peer recognition could lead them to be overly invested in standards of evaluation or "merit" that buttress our highly unequal social order. Indeed, if black elites were to get what many seem to want most—namely, their "racially proportionate" share of status, income, and wealth—this would still leave a whole lot of broke black people. Even if the black poor were to face no racial prejudice and their fortunes were no worse than poor whites, they would still be *poor* and thus at the mercy of the rich and powerful.

This assessment, it seems to me, is basically correct. The black poor should seek multiracial working-class solidarity and participate in the labor movement. But they should also maintain solidarity with other blacks to fight racial injustices and anti-black racism. There are no perfect allies awaiting the black poor. There are deep cleavages within the working class as well, as many among the white working class seem to identify more strongly with rich whites than with

disadvantaged people of other races. And therefore it seems to me, as it did to Du Bois in the 1940s, that the black proletariat should not abandon its traditional ties to progressive elements among the black elite.

In “The Paradox of African American Rebellion,” West takes a position on the black elite that still strikes me as entirely apt.¹⁶ He argues that the black freedom struggle cannot be re-energized without a critical mass of the new middle class. Black elites possess vital skills, resources, and power, and most blacks look to them for leadership. But black progressives and the black working class must hold the black elite accountable and push them beyond their neoliberal reformism. And yet, West suggests, reliance on the black elite is only a *temporary* measure, a pragmatic compromise until more reliable progressive forces can be mobilized and organized.

CONCLUSION

There is no question that black solidarity is currently fragile. Blacks are not as cohesive as they were during past eras, when very few could expect to acquire significant wealth, status, or power and almost every black person’s life prospects were far below that of the average white person. It can be difficult to trust those that clearly benefit from the status quo and have something to lose by participating in the collective struggle. Black unity cannot therefore be the emancipatory tool it once was. Nostalgic calls for the degree of solidarity characteristic of the civil rights era are unhelpful. And we cannot expect

16. Cornel West, “The Paradox of the African American Rebellion,” in *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 22–38.

black solidarity to be the solution to every social injustice that affects blacks. It is not the best vehicle for all the hopes and aspirations of progressives. Yet when it comes to demanding racial justice, greater racial equality, and an end to ghetto poverty, I believe that black solidarity still serves a vital progressive function.

