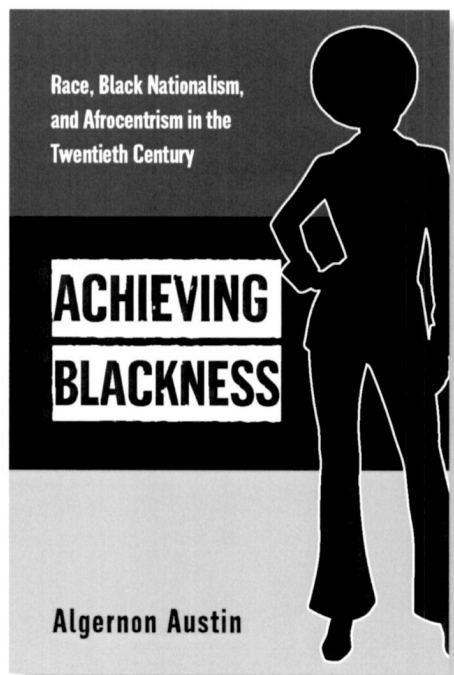


REVIEWS

BOOKS



POSTCARDS FROM THE POST-BLACK REALITY

ACHIEVING BLACKNESS: RACE, BLACK NATIONALISM, AND AFROCENTRISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

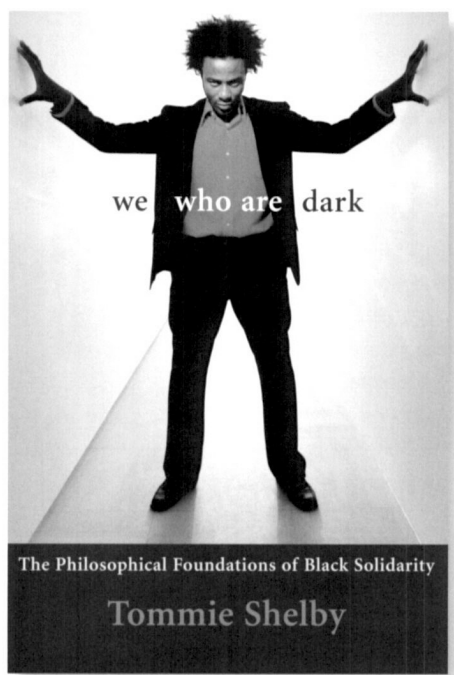
By Algernon Austin

Belknap Press, 2005

WE WHO ARE DARK: THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BLACK SOLIDARITY

By Tommie Shelby

Verso, 2005



REFRESHING. The word comes up too often in reviews of these two books. It is my first clue that they are going to rub me the wrong way.

When Black scholars garner the adjective "refreshing," it rarely bodes well for Black people on the whole. Ward Connerly is refreshing. Orlando Patterson is refreshing. Refreshing Black people often, to subvert Peter Finley Dunne's famous words, comfort the comfortable and afflict the afflicted.

And the authors do not disappoint as they both hold forth on what appears to be the fashionable lament of the day: Can Black folk get it together? In fact, both authors take the lament even further to ask if there is any good reason for Blacks to unite on the basis of their "membership" as African Americans.

To be fair, both authors handle Black nationalism with some nuance and sensitivity. Austin does a good inventory of the little-known accomplishments of so-called cultural nationalism and lays bare some of the misconceptions about the "cultural" versus "revolutionary" nationalism dichotomy of the 1970s. You can almost hear the groan as Shelby, a Harvard philosopher, does the heavy lifting to critique Black nationalist philosophies through the lens of pragmatic philosophy. Austin, a sociologist in search of a perch as America's newest Black public intellectual, is on a more popular mission—to reveal the vagaries of

racial and ethnic construction and move America away from "essentialist" thinking.

Both men do a decent critique of the homophobia and sexism that have plagued significant trends in Black nationalist work but mostly as evidence for their argument that there is no positive basis for Black solidarity. Austin is clear that Blacks should eschew race solidarity altogether and put our efforts into multi "racial" organizing and solutions to addressing poverty. Shelby, by contrast, argues for Black solidarity based on our shared oppression and the need to end it. In his proposal, Blacks would operate pluralistically to build multiple alliances as individual and "sub" group interests require. He even suggests the development of guiding principles to help shape how Black "leaders" make decisions about strategy. Shelby appears to not have known how often the idea of national guiding principles has come up throughout Black political discourse, including the most recent effort by Tavis Smiley, *Covenant with Black America*. However, he is clear that his framework for "thin" or pragmatic Black solidarity is the "solution" to that pesky question of Blacks having solidarity beyond their oppression—the so-called "essentialist" thinking that there is more to Blackness than social construction.

Oddly enough, Shelby barely addresses the most recent assertion of an essential Black or,

more accurately, Afrikan identity—Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism came to prominence during the 1990s when concerns about drugs, school failure and low self-esteem in Black communities were driving an animated public conversation about values. Afrocentrism at its best critiqued and rendered visible the Eurocentrism that dominates nearly every aspect of life and learning in the U.S. At its worst, it promoted a narrow view of family and even reified notions of Black pathology and social problems as cultural in the main.

Austin, on the other hand, deals extensively with Afrocentrism and its leading proponents. While he critiques its conservative tendencies and the way it reinforces certain Eurocentric notions, Austin also takes Afrocentrism to task on the "science." Afrocentric notions like the idea that melanin might have properties beyond mere coloring or that Egypt is an African civilization (might just be the geography that gave that away) have perturbed conservative and liberal academics alike. In fact, the dogged fight to claim the heritage of Egyptian civilization (in which Austin's defense of the proponents of Egypt as European is nothing less than, er, refreshing) reveals how important history and culture can be in creating solidarity.

The idea of Black identity beyond shared oppression as essentialist nonsense is one that is gaining currency, and Shelby and Austin are part of a growing group of "post-Blacks." There is no Black agenda, no positive Black identity. What's left of our sense of self as Black, they say, is a tattered artifact from the '70s.

Of course, the idea that Blacks have no common ground beyond our oppression is not new. What is new is where this thinking is gaining ground. Perhaps the most troubling manifestation of this thinking is in public policy where even "critical race theorists" are arguing that concentrations of Black people are bad for racial justice. This discussion is most prominent in the debate around rebuilding and recovery post-Katrina, where "experts" are prescribing that the city of New Orleans break up historic Black communities as a way to address structural poverty. Underlying

this framework is a sense that residents are not cultural beings with identities that extend beyond their poverty. They cannot understand or even imagine why Blacks in New Orleans might want to live together in community. Imagine if these connections were truly valued: one might propose policies that redistributed the resources, not the people.

Yet, writers like Shelby and Austin are creating the theoretical foundations for policies that marginalize and render invisible culture and connection as assets. Austin urges an abandonment of false racial and ethnic categories for class remedies, while Shelby allows for Black solidarity, but only on the most limited terrain. Although neither directly espouses the trap of color-blindness, to ignore the role of racial and cultural solidarity in advancing white supremacy is to certainly be privilege-blind.

Have things changed since the so-called Black Power era of the early 1970s? Of course. We have much to learn and understand about our changing relationships and alliances both within and outside of Black communities. Is there a Black Agenda, a set of issues that disproportionately affect Blacks and require organized responses? Absolutely. Efforts ranging from the Covenant with Black America to the progressive, globally focused Institute on the Black World, underscore the range of issues and interests that might drive such an agenda. HIV/AIDS in Africa and throughout the Diaspora, just-recovery for Katrina/Rita survivors and targeted Anti-Black racism or Afrophobia are among the critical issues demanding our collective attention. Should we as Blacks work multiracially to advance these issues? No doubt. In fact, Blacks are often at the forefront of coalition building, so much so that many of us are forgoing the development of progressive Black political infrastructure to work across race and ethnicity.

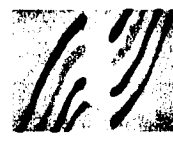
The primary question may be why is it so important to bury the idea of a Black political movement, a movement that has inspired millions the world over? Perhaps it is because Black Power is still scary—even in its sleep.

—Makani Themba-Nixon

SPECTRUM: FROM RIGHT TO LEFT IN THE WORLD OF IDEAS

By Perry Anderson

Verso, 2006



OUR SHARED SENSE of the state's proper role and responsibilities is in a parlous state. After Katrina, the federal government looked to private charity for responses to the crisis. Americans too often cede

the state's responsibilities of care and concern, especially to communities of color, as Katrina graphically demonstrated.

This crisis is not merely political. Common understandings of justice and the demands we fairly make of the state and each other have collapsed. Perry Anderson's new collection of essays on twentieth century political thought suggests how this happens and hints at responses as it tills the rich soil of the last century's intellectual trends. Anderson was an early editor of *New Left Review* and today is a professor of history and sociology at UCLA. The essays collected in *Spectrum*, prepared over an extended period, provide incisive portraits of critical intellectuals Friedrich von Hayek on the right to Eric Hobsbawm on the left.

Rare among American thinkers, Anderson explains the strength of the intellectual right, critiques the weakness of the so-called center and draws on the Global South as a source of innovative ideas. This collection includes an insightful essay on Gabriel García Márquez, while a previous collection (*A Zone of Engagement*) took on the Brazilian Roberto Unger.

Despite his writings for *New Left Review* and *The Nation*, Anderson remains less known than he deserves. By providing an invaluable guide to the state of political thought today, *Spectrum* should, by rights, be the start of a resurgence of new interest in his rich and rewarding work.

—Aziz Huq