



The meaning of race

David Marriott sees limits in the liberal approach to black solidarity

We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity, by Tommie Shelby (Harvard University Press) £17.95/\$27.95 (hb)

In this insightful and provocative book, the philosopher and political theorist Tommie Shelby takes a new look at the meaning of black solidarity in the post-civil rights era. Turning an historic lens on what he calls “pragmatic nationalism”, Shelby’s main targets of critique are contemporary forms of black political identity identified totally with monolithic notions of race.

Through readings of the origins of Black Nationalism in the US Shelby argues, convincingly I think, that the growing diversity of black civil life has given rise to political identities that represent more complex relations to the state and to racial ideas of solidarity. The Black Nationalist appeal to one collective black identity only serves to mask these emergences and their attempts to broker a more concrete, less ideal, relation between rights and the substantive inequalities of black life. In *We Who Are Dark*, Shelby wants to preserve a less manichean, less antinomian approach to the problem of black solidarity. As such, he argues for a closer integration of minoritarian, or identitarian, discourses and liberal ideas of individual and collective autonomy. It is this appeal to pragmatic nationality that anchors

the main concern of the book: namely, the attempt to forge a politics of anti-racist freedom that includes the value of black solidarity.

But can the traditions of black nationalist thought and classical liberalism be integrated? What would the end of racism look like from a liberal point of view? And what would the liberal appeal to universal rights and individual autonomy have to say to a state founded on a racial oligarchy? If Black Nationalism represents an illiberal focus on racism, why is not the liberal denial of race not seen as equally illiberal?

Important to Shelby’s argument is the desire to preserve a black cultural identity as against the latent but presumed ideology of a shared racial victimhood. He dismisses the notion of a shared or deep-seated common bond between blacks based on racial kinship. For Shelby being black says nothing about one’s politics; nor should black political solidarity be based on the limitations of ethnocultural solidarity as a people. If black self-determination is to amount to more than an empty formalism, for Shelby this means that blackness “should not be understood in terms of racialist, ethnic, cultural, or national modes of blackness” but in terms of “antiracist principles and goals”. By showing a commitment to such principles and goals, black Americans can begin the process of overturning antiblack racism and the policies that continue to define them as a racial group.

At issue here is the debate over what exactly race means in a time of global politics and global capital. Does it make sense any longer to speak of a black national or diasporic consciousness opposed to, yet nonetheless enclosed by, statist

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ideas of solidarity and rebellion? Does the idea of a plural black “we” necessarily represent progressive black conceptions of social justice?

Shelby thinks that the passing of civil rights legislation has not altered the racial actualities of power nor has it made redundant black demands for substantive equality, demands which remain largely unrealised at both the federal and state level. Additionally, Shelby claims that colourblind liberalism has more than an incidental role to play in the continuing fight against racism. But how, when citizenship and civic life in the United States is entirely taken up with the signs and values of race?

The main emphasis of Shelby’s advocacy for interracial and intra-racial coalitions is on public policy. What remains absent, however, is any sustained encounter with the limits of the statist model of liberal democracy. Shelby, in brief, is no Marxist, nor does he appear to be questioning modern assumptions about rights and property, especially about the right to property as the legal guarantee of one’s personhood. Rather, he conceives of pragmatic nationality as a plea for inclusiveness rather than as a transvaluation of America’s racially oligarchic political traditions.

In this regard, there appears to be an acceptance of the prevailing doctrines of American liberalism in Shelby’s work. That is to say, pragmatic nationalism fails, in the final analysis, to address why racial violence against blacks was and is systematic to the progress of rights in the United States. If the contemporary role that race plays in Black America remains the fulcrum of the book, Shelby’s call to solidarity seems to be asking for blacks to give up something in order to get on board. As if changing into intra-racial running shoes is all that is needed for the black masses to enter into the race (no pun intended).

Further, the discussion of the interrelation of black individual autonomy and class fails, in my view, to go beyond the liberal idea of formal access to juridical equality. Although I agree with Shelby’s critique of ethnoracial essentialism, I think that this juridical insistence on

formal equality does not acknowledge the ways in which the rights discourse happily coexists with the substantive inequalities of civic life. In brief, Shelby’s pragmatism isn’t severe enough in its understanding of the collective immiseration of black life in the United States.

Nonetheless, the value of Shelby’s book is that it forces us to rethink many shibboleths about black solidarity and collective identity. What he makes clear are the too simple solutions offered by Black Nationalism in an age now dominated by global capital. Not only has history proved the futility of the black power call to the funding and control of exclusively black organisations, such calls only now make sense as an inverse mirroring of white statist models.

Ideologically, too, the call for a black cultural particularism, and the preservation and fetishism of a supposedly shared culture, has resulted, Shelby rightly argues, in chauvinistic claims about authenticity. That is, to be authentically black means that one is, or ought to be, culturally black. It’s a view in which blackness is reduced to the wearing of a mask, the blacker the better. But can these ideas of a common cultural identity provide a defensible ideal of political solidarity? For Shelby, the answer is clearly no. Black authenticity is not about what one has, or is seen to have, but what one does. This is a useful corrective. Indeed, Shelby dismisses such proprietary claims as the politics of a resentment too obvious to name.

In this sense, *We Who Are Dark* represents an important attempt to go beyond the political ontologies and metaphysical politics of race that have so dominated discussions since the nineteenth century, and earlier. The question as to whether Shelby has succeeded in removing the notion of political solidarity from their purview remains open, however. Since Shelby fails, in my view, to treat the close historic ties between capital and racial violence dialectically, solidarity remains too formal and too speculative (that is, too liberal and too nationalist) a notion. That said, *We Who Are Dark* remains a powerful and timely contribution to the debate. **E**