

---

---

## Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Book Reviews (Spring 2006)

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

---

---

### **Review of Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*.**

Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005.

#### **Lawrie Balfour**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Politics  
P.O. Box 400787  
University of Virginia  
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4787  
[klb3q@virginia.edu](mailto:klb3q@virginia.edu)

What political resources are available to oppose racial injustice in the post-civil rights era? How is it possible both to resist various forms of essentialism and “embrace a form of blackness as an emancipatory tool” (4)? Tommie Shelby’s *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* offers an elegant, carefully conceived answer to both questions: pragmatic black nationalism. Shelby’s position is nationalist in its conviction that it makes political sense to consider black Americans to be a “nation within a nation.”

And it is pragmatic in the everyday sense of the word. For his concern is to build on a self-conception that many African Americans already accept and to articulate principles that might support the struggle against antiblack racism and entrenched racial disadvantage.

Shelby’s argument is premised on what he calls a “thin conception of blackness.” In a society in which somatic characteristics and/or African heritage mark some citizens as “black,” he writes, thin blackness captures “the fact of their racial subordination and their collective resolve to triumph over it” (56). It is also capable of sustaining a “robust” form of solidarity, a unity characterized by mutual identification, special concern, shared values and goals, loyalty, and mutual trust (67-71). Crucially for Shelby, this solidarity is compatible with a liberal commitment to individual autonomy and with an appreciation for the deep heterogeneity of African American experiences. There is a great deal to admire and learn from in Shelby’s argument, particularly in its imaginative reconstruction of canonical texts to illuminate contemporary political life. Still, I would like to suggest a couple of concerns and to indicate some possible avenues along which the argument might be extended.

First, the concerns. One of the preoccupations of *We Who Are Dark* is to rebut the charge that the price of black solidarity is the suppression of internal divisions through coercion or hierarchy. Shelby pays particular attention to the dynamics of gender and class in black communities and undercuts arguments that might justify the establishment of an elite male leadership. Despite his scrupulous attention to these issues, however, I wonder whether this conception of black solidarity displaces, without dissolving, internal divisions and imbalances of power. Just as feminist theorists have found that a politics grounded in shared opposition to patriarchy can be

as problematic as one based on thick conceptions of womanhood, it is not clear how a shared vulnerability to racial oppression is any more satisfactory. Indeed, to say that “all blacks have a vested interest in racial equality, regardless of their cultural identification, class position, gender, or age” (228), is to leave the political content of that ideal unspecified in ways that might produce the very effects that Shelby aims to avoid.

Let me illustrate by turning to one of the discussions of black diversity in Shelby’s argument. In his critique of “black corporatism” (121-30), he makes a persuasive case that the demand for a single, cohesive political body that aspires to speak for African Americans as a group will likely short-change what Cathy Cohen calls “cross-cutting issues.” In contrast to “consensus issues,” these are thought to be of narrower concern, especially when they primarily affect the most marginalized sub-groups, including sexual minorities, single mothers, and the poor. Although Shelby’s critique of the corporate model is compelling, it is less clear is that pragmatic black nationalism really answers Cohen’s challenge. By calling attention to cross-cutting *issues*, Cohen indicates that the content of the struggle for racial justice, far from being given, is as much a site for division and exclusion as black identity. Despite Shelby’s concern to give priority to the most disadvantaged black Americans, the invocation of a “black general will” (32) raises questions about how the shared concerns that animate black solidarity will be defined and, more importantly, how those concerns that many black Americans perceive as secondary, partial, or deviant will be accommodated.

Part of the difficulty, it seems, is that the focus on thickness and thinness may prevent *We Who Are Black* from coming to terms with the static character of even the thinnest definition

of black identity, when it is essentially fixed by the racism of American society. And Shelby’s critique of “identity politics” neglects promising alternative routes to conceptualizing the relationship between politics and identity. Let me suggest just one possibility, which is offered by Angela Davis. Writing about the promise and limitations of “women of color” organizing, Davis explains that “this political commitment is not based on the specific histories of racialized communities or its constituent members, but rather constructs an agenda agreed upon by all who are a part of it.” “In my opinion,” she continues, “the most exciting potential of women of color formations resides in the possibility of politicizing this identity – basing the identity on politics rather than the politics on identity” (Davis 320).

Now the questions. Shelby’s book does a superb job of highlighting ideological differences among African Americans, yet more remains to be said about how pragmatic black nationalism negotiates those divisions. For instance, he explicitly draws on the tradition of black Marxism to underscore the significance of class fissures, but it would be helpful to take the analysis one step further. Is it reasonable to expect “robust” solidarity between those black Americans who contend that racial justice requires a significant or complete restructuring of the U.S. economy and those seeking equality of opportunity within the existing framework? Further discussion of this and other familiar divisions, perhaps through an account of a specific issue, such as reparations, would make the potential political contributions of pragmatic black nationalism more salient.

I also wonder about the relationship between this form of nationalism and “American” national identity. The epigraphs with which the book begins—excerpts from W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Criteria of Negro Art” and James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift

Every Voice and Sing"—suggest that Shelby's goal is full inclusion in the polity. It would be instructive to hear more about the character of that polity from Shelby's perspective. Does he endorse a version of the "multiple traditions" or "anomaly" thesis in which racial slavery and its legacies are divisible from American liberal democratic commitments? Or is his view more compatible with the "symbiosis" thesis, which holds that these legacies and commitments are too thoroughly intertwined to be disentangled (Mills 130-37)? And, if so, how might Shelby respond to the contention that a pragmatic stance toward the prospect of black liberation entails "rejecting the idea of America, at least as it stands" (Taylor, 101)?

Related questions about the function of "America" emerge when Shelby quotes from Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn*. Reflecting that blacks "have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory" (243), Du Bois links himself and his ancestors to a larger Pan-African world, a linkage that Shelby acknowledges but says is beyond the scope of his argument. It would be valuable to know why. In light of the worldly orientation that has been crucial to so many African American political thinkers, in general, and to many of the figures in Shelby's study, in particular, and in light of contemporary left theorists' increasing attention the promise of transnational affiliation, why define injustice and its remedies within a (U.S.) national frame?

Du Bois's resonant phrase, "one long memory," gives rise to another cluster of questions. In an effort to articulate a political conception of blackness that is more capacious and flexible than those relying on shared ethnocultural identity, Shelby hopes to avoid the antagonisms and struggles over authority that cultural claims engender. Are they avoidable? I am not so sure. And I would raise similar questions about arguments for

"civic nationalism," which Shelby cites approvingly in conjunction with his discussion of Martin Delany (51, 271). In both cases, the work done by a group's "long memory" and the interpretations to which it gives rise are largely unexamined. How does one get from collective memory to "a standing readiness to act collectively in the political arena" (153)? What is the role of cultural attachments in wedding people to the principles that Shelby and civic nationalists celebrate? In this regard, it would be illuminating to hear more about what Shelby means by a "narrative-free black solidarity" (223) and whether he would accept, as an alternative, a solidarity defined by multiple, contestable, overlapping cultural narratives.

None of this, finally, undercuts the substantial contribution of *We Who Are Black*. At a moment when it appears that the persistence of racial inequality is widely accepted as an untroubling fact of life, Shelby's inquiry into the virtues and limitations of black solidarity offers a badly needed incitement. And it does much more than incite. Shelby identifies and explores precisely the kinds of issues that need to be confronted if Americans are to stand a chance of reviving the democratic energies that are in such dangerously short supply.

## References

- Cohen, Cathy J. 1999. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1998. Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the USA." In *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Mills, Charles W. 1998. *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Shelby, Tommie. 2005. *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, Paul C. 2004. What's the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist? *Metaphilosophy* 35 (1/2): 99-114.