

Charles W. Mills: Black Radical Liberalism or Black Marxism?

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Abstract: Here I both celebrate and critique the legacy of Charles W. Mills. I begin by offering some reflections on the trajectory of Mills's career and intellectual development, focusing on his move from Marxist philosophy to the philosophy of race. I then attempt to undermine an argument in Mills's final book, for why those interested in emancipation should choose liberalism over Marxism. By contrasting Mills with the late Italian Marxist philosopher of history Domenico Losurdo, with whom Mills shared a blistering critique of "racial" liberalism but whom I claim Mills misread, I seek to weaken key premises in Mills's argument.

Key words: Charles Mills, Domenico Losurdo, communism, Marxism, black radical liberalism, philosophy of race, racial justice, anti-colonial revolution, white supremacy, racial contract

In this paper I both celebrate and critique the legacy of the late, great Black radical philosopher Charles W. Mills. In the first part of the paper, I offer some reflections on the trajectory of Mills's career and intellectual development, focusing on his move from Marxist philosophy to the philosophy of race. In the second part of the paper, I attempt to undermine what I take to be an implicit argument in Mills's final book, for why those interested in emancipation should choose liberalism over Marxism. By contrasting Mills with the late Italian Marxist philosopher of history Domenico Losurdo, with whom Mills shared a blistering critique of "racial" liberalism but whom I claim Mills misread, I seek to weaken key premises in Mills's argument. That argument turns on the differential viability of

liberalism and Marxism as political philosophies. I conclude that it is at least an open question whether liberalism is the more viable of the two.

Part 1

The loss of Charles W. Mills is a loss not only to the ranks of Black philosophy and philosophers, but a loss to the discipline of philosophy as such, and a loss to progressive-minded people the world over. Mills fought in his own way, in his own discipline, and in academia as a whole through his deeply interdisciplinary approach, to make the world a better place. He gave voice to the marginalized within mainstream analytic philosophy and pushed for the discipline to become more radical.

For much of the twentieth century, Anglo-American professional political philosophy was notoriously conservative (or at least apolitical) by the standards of leftist politics in the rest of the world. With the publication of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* in 1971, more left-leaning views became acceptable, and for a brief time this led to the flourishing of what came to be called "Analytic Marxism" in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Mills got into the professional philosophy game in 1985 when one could still hope to find a job with a dissertation on Marxism, but as the bottom was beginning to fall out of the cottage industry of Analytic Marxism. In the 1980s and 1990s Mills published a number of insightful articles elucidating key concepts in the Marxist lexicon, mostly flowing from his dissertation, "The Concept of Ideology in the Thought of Marx and Engels." But he was also prolific writing and publishing work that explored social, political, and economic issues in his native Jamaica, and the Caribbean more broadly, from a Marxist perspective.²

In the meantime, however, Analytic Marxism had grown moribund. The philosopher G. A. Cohen, one its leading lights, despite remaining a socialist, increasingly described himself as an "ex-Marxist"³ and became a critic of Rawls and Nozick from the left. This change no doubt had something to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the retreat of Marxism and the left in the 1990s. Capital was triumphant; labor was weak. Mills sensed which way the wind was blowing and made a prudent career

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1. Consider, for instance, the fact that *Philosophy & Public Affairs*—now one of the top journals for English-speaking social and political philosophy and philosophy generally—regularly published work on Marx and Marxism in that era. Today one looks mostly in vain for such keywords in its pages. See Cohen, Nagel, and Scanlon, *Marx, Justice, and History*.
 2. Some of these lesser known but immensely valuable papers were later collected in Mills, *Radical Theory, Caribbean Reality*.
 3. See Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 105.

decision to switch full-time from Marxism to issues surrounding race and racism. An APA panel he had organized on “market socialism” had four panelists and just one audience member! A prominent Black philosopher warned him at the time that writing on race would be career suicide, but as Mills pointed out, “He could not have been more wrong.”⁴ It wasn’t simply strategic, of course. Mills himself, though a privileged “brown” or “red-man” in his native Jamaica, was Black in North America. In Canada where he had done his PhD at the University of Toronto, the racism was “more oblique.”⁵ Now living and working in the intensely race-conscious U.S. full-time, Mills combined his longstanding passion for issues of racism, colonialism, and imperialism with his developing American racial identity to derive his new persona and research program as a “critical philosopher of race” in the mid-1990s. He continued to work in this mold until his untimely death in September 2021.

Who were Mills’s intended audiences?⁶ There were at least three groups for whom he wrote, often simultaneously: other Black philosophers and those writing on (critical) philosophy of race, mainstream philosophers in general and social and political philosophers in particular, and radical and progressive philosophers. One way to describe the bulk of his work after his “turn” in the 1990s is as an attempt to bring the Black experience and the concerns of Black people qua Black to bear on the concerns of the latter two groups. He was deeply invested in, as he said, deghettoizing philosophy of race and the concerns of Black philosophers.⁷ He worried, in his last published book before his death, that despite the increased visibility of Black philosophers and the topics of race and racism in professional analytic philosophy—due in large measure to the influence of his “hit” 1997 book *The Racial Contract*—this might be mere “conceptual tokenization.”⁸

In retrospect his mission was incredibly ambitious, but I contend that Mills mostly succeeded with aplomb. He was gifted with an exceedingly perspicuous and unpretentious writing style that meant he could adopt the terminology of his audience and strip it down to its clearest expression, without getting bogged down in jargon and obscurity. In 2020 he delivered the prestigious Tanner Lecture on Human Values entitled

4. See Mills, “Red Shift,” 22.

5. Mills, *From Class to Race*, 121.

6. This is a question Derrick Darby has fruitfully pondered. My own reflections here have no doubt been influenced by his perceptive remarks. See Darby, “Charles Mills’s Liberal Redemption Song.”

7. See Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 188–89.

8. *Ibid.*, 189.

“Theorizing Racial Justice”; he was scheduled to speak on “Rawls, Race, and Non-Ideal Theory” at a conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* at the University of Notre Dame just days after his passing; and before moving from Northwestern to the CUNY Graduate Center in 2016 he allegedly had a competing offer from Yale.⁹ Mills had gotten the attention of the mainstream, that’s for certain.

What about the radicals and progressives? With them, too, Mills had great success. Although Marxism has all but disappeared from mainstream analytic philosophy—although that may be turning around, as capitalism increasingly loses credibility in the West¹⁰—interest in issues of race and racial justice has surged among left-leaning philosophers, for whom Mills is an icon and trailblazer. And rightly so. He spent decades hammering home the historical and ongoing injustice faced by African Americans (and Blacks more generally) and taking to task both mainstream theorists of justice and radicals concerned with capitalism and class for failing to prioritize—or, in many cases, even acknowledge—the demands of racial justice.

In my own case, Mills was an inspiration and a mentor. But unlike many or perhaps most readers of Mills, I came to his work not through the widely taught *Racial Contract*, which I only read later, but through his work as a Marxist-philosopher-turned-critic of what he called “White Marxism.”¹¹ Just as I was finding my own Marxist “faith,” I encountered Mills’s shattering essay “European Specters,” in which he called out Marx and Engels themselves for being white supremacists and anti-black racists.¹² Mills reproduced obscure quotations from their collected works in which they employed the n-word in denigrating ways and made other statements that seemed to imply that Marx’s doctrines were never meant to apply to a truly “international” working class, but only a European (-descended)—i.e., white—one. I had taken for granted that Marxism was a truly universal philosophy of struggle and that Marx was the philosophical champion of oppressed people everywhere. And from what I knew at that time, history seemed to bear this interpretation out. After all, had there not been Chinese Marxism and African Marxism, among many others? But Mills used these racist comments by the founders of Marxism as a rhetorical launching pad to help make the case for a race-first black radicalism that mostly eschewed the topics of capitalism and class struggle. By the time he was prematurely snatched away from us, Mills’s calling

9. See Leiter, “The Rise of Philosophy of Race.”

10. See Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?*

11. This persona can be found most clearly in the excellent *From Class to Race*.

12. See Mills, “European Specters.”

card had become “black radical liberalism,” sometimes “black radical Kantianism.”¹³

Mills had issued a challenge to true believers, and I was shaken—but not yet convinced. What I found in my own attempt to respond to Mills’s challenge¹⁴ was that his pivot away from Marxism—whether this amounted to a rightward or leftward shift on the political spectrum depends on one’s perspective, of course—issued in peculiar (even mistaken!) readings of some of the primary texts. Thus, to the extent that the case for moving from Marxism to black radical liberalism rests on these readings, it is weakened to the same extent that these readings can be shown to be false or mistaken. (Readers can of course judge for themselves whether and to what extent I have succeeded in undermining the case for such a shift, and also the extent to which combing through dusty old primary texts of dead white male philosophers should even be remotely relevant to the pressing issues of racial injustice and Black liberation!)

What I want to do now is engage in some more textual sleuthing, in order respectfully to take issue with the way my late mentor’s liberalism, however “black” and “radical,” could act as a distorting lens when he interpreted other radicals, especially Marxists, and indeed the prospects of Marxism itself. Let there be no misunderstanding about my modest aims here. Read Charles W. Mills—read everything he ever wrote—he was a giant of philosophy!¹⁵ But radicals take note: intentionally or not, Mills sometimes played fast and loose when mobilizing authorities to at once downgrade Marxism and shore up his unique brand of liberalism. I trust that Charles would have taken what follows in the spirit it is intended: as a bit of comradely criticism.

Part 2

In the very first paragraph of his final published book before his untimely passing, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (2017), Mills invokes the work of the late Italian philosopher of history Domenico Losurdo. Losurdo’s *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, originally published in 2006 and translated into English in 2011, is an exposé of the shocking crimes of putatively “liberal” regimes and the racist, exclusionary views of their self-described “liberal” intellectual and theoretical

13. See Mills, “Epilogue (as Prologue),” “Black Radical Kantianism,” and “W. E. B. Du Bois.”

14. See Slack, “From Class to Race and Back Again.”

15. For starters, I recommend seeking out the hard-to-find: Mills, “Black Trash,” although I would bet that it will be included in the forthcoming posthumous collection *White Leviathan*.

spokesmen.¹⁶ It's natural for Mills to refer to Losurdo's study at the beginning of *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, since Mills is in complete agreement with Losurdo's characterization of historical liberalism—it has overwhelmingly been a “racial liberalism” meant only for a ruling race or races—and Mills wants to acknowledge a recent work by a fellow radical published by a reputable press (Verso) that sets a precedent for and helps legitimate what is to come in the book.

But Mills's project in his book is not simply to indict “racial liberalism” for what Losurdo calls its “exclusion clauses,” but to *retrieve* liberalism from its sordid history and remake it as “black radical liberalism.” “Liberalism is globally triumphant,”¹⁷ says Mills: “with the collapse of Second World and Third World socialist ideologico-political alternatives, liberalism in one form or another has become globally hegemonic.”¹⁸ This is a refrain he has repeated consistently since his “turn” in the mid-1990s, one frequently accompanied by declarations about living in a “post-Marxist world” and the failure of “really existing socialism.” Mills's point seems to be: “if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!” Or, as he puts it in the title to one of his chapters, since liberalism is the only legitimate theoretical space (on the) left, we (radicals) ought to “Occupy Liberalism!” A reconstruction of Mills's implicit argument might look something like this:

- 1) The two political philosophies that have the most emancipatory potential are Marxism and liberalism.
- 2) A political philosophy that has the most emancipatory potential, but which is nonetheless nonviable should not be adopted by those seeking emancipation, while one that is viable should be so adopted.
- 3) Marxism is no longer a viable position, for various reasons.
- 4) Therefore, Marxism should not be adopted by those seeking emancipation.
- 5) Liberalism, on the other hand, *is* viable.
- 6) Therefore, liberalism—as a political philosophy that has emancipatory potential *and* is viable—should be adopted by those seeking emancipation.

Let's call this the “Viability Argument,” since the crucial premises for our purposes here are 3) and 5), which have to do with the respective viability

16. See Losurdo, *Liberalism*.

17. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 28.

18. *Ibid.*, 139.

of Marxism and liberalism. While Mills needs them to be true, we will see that Losurdo takes them to be false.

Later in a chapter that was originally an interview with the British “New Left Project,” Mills again brings up Losurdo’s book and assimilates its purpose to his own goal of retrieving liberalism. Mills’s aim is clearly to demonstrate to his radical interlocutors that he is not alone in thinking that liberalism is worth saving despite its chequered legacy. Here is how Mills characterizes Losurdo’s book for his radical audience:

To be sure, it is a familiar point to radicals, if somewhat less so to the non-radical majority, that the population as a whole has not historically been recognized as deserving the protections of [liberal] norms, so that the opponents of emancipation have all too often *themselves* been liberals. Freedom has been construed as justifiably resting on the enslavement of some; equality has been restricted to those deemed worthy of it (i.e., those more equal than others); fraternity has been literal, an all-boys’ club. Domenico Losurdo’s recently translated *Liberalism: A Counter-History* provides a devastating exposé of “liberal thought [not] in its abstract purity, but liberalism, and hence the liberal movement and liberal society, in their concrete reality.” It is an illuminatingly sordid history of the ideology’s complicity with racial slavery, white working-class indenturedness, colonialism and imperialism (“A ‘Master-Race Democracy’ on a Planetary Scale,” in one chapter’s title), and the conceptual connection between the Nazi “final solution” and Europe’s earlier extermination programs against indigenous peoples.

Yet it is noteworthy that in his concluding pages, Losurdo still affirms the “merits and strong points of the intellectual tradition under examination.” His “counter-history” has been aimed at dispelling the “habitual hagiography” that surrounds liberalism, and the related “myth of the gradual, peaceful transition, on the basis of purely internal motivations and impulses, from liberalism to democracy, or from general enjoyment of negative liberty to an ever wider recognition of political rights.” In reality, he emphasizes, “the classics of the liberal tradition” were generally hostile to democracy; the “exclusion clauses” required “violent upheavals” to be overcome; progress was not linear but a matter of advances and retreats; external crisis often played a crucial role; and white working-class and black inclusion in the polity came at the cost of their participation in colonial wars against native peoples. Nonetheless, his final paragraph insists: “However difficult such an operation might be for those committed to overcoming liberalism’s exclusion clauses, to take up the legacy of this intellectual tradition is an absolutely unavoidable task. . . . [L]iberalism’s merits are too significant and too evident for it to be necessary to credit it with other, completely imaginary ones. Among the latter is the alleged spontaneous capacity for self-correction often attributed to it. . . . Only in opposition to [such] pervasive repressions

and transfigurations is the book now ending presented as a ‘counter-history’; bidding farewell to hagiography is the precondition for landing on the firm ground of history.” So for Losurdo one can accept the indictment of actual historic liberalism, and its failure to live up to its putative universalism, without going on to conclude either that liberalism must therefore be abandoned or that liberalism’s own internal dynamic will naturally correct itself. Rather, the appropriate conclusion is that liberalism can be retrieved, but that it will take political struggle to do so.¹⁹

Mills has misunderstood Losurdo’s project here. In claiming that “for Losurdo, one can accept the indictment of actual historic liberalism, and its failure to live up to its putative universalism, without going on to conclude . . . that liberalism must therefore be abandoned . . . the appropriate conclusion is that liberalism can be retrieved,” Mills transforms an unrepentant Marxist and communist into a left-liberal like himself. In uncovering the authentic Losurdo we will confront Mills with a compelling counternarrative, one which in the context of the “Viability Argument” suggests not only the falsity of 3) and 5), but also that it is not liberalism but Marxism—as a political philosophy that has emancipatory potential *and* is viable—which should be adopted by those seeking emancipation.

Although Losurdo is not as explicit in the book as he could be, in those concluding pages Mills refers to he is fairly clear about the tradition he subscribes to and from which he is approaching liberalism. He notes that “Liberalism has proved capable of learning from its antagonist (the tradition of thinking that, starting with “radicalism” and passing through Marx, issued in the revolutions which variously invoked him) to a far greater extent than its antagonist has proved capable of learning from it.”²⁰ Losurdo then lists what he calls liberalism’s three major “strong points”: 1) “an extraordinary flexibility, [with which] it constantly sought to react and rise to the challenges of the time”; 2) “None has been as committed as [liberalism] to thinking through the decisive problem of the limitation of power”; and 3) “In economics . . . liberal thought has vigorously insisted on the need for competition between individuals in the market, in order to develop social wealth and the productive forces.”²¹ It should be obvious to the attentive reader that Losurdo is in the “antagonist” camp—note the unmistakable Marxian language of developing the “productive forces”—and

19. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

20. By pre-Marxian “radicalism,” Losurdo has in mind French and American abolitionists and egalitarians (white and Black) as well as Black radicals such as the Haitian revolutionaries.

21. Losurdo, *Liberalism*, 343.

is admonishing the Marxist tradition for failing to adequately learn from *its* antagonist, liberalism.

Elsewhere Losurdo favorably contrasts Soviet and Chinese communism with the capitalist West. For instance, noting how during the second world war anti-colonial leaders and revolutionaries were full of praise and admiration for Joseph Stalin, Losurdo writes:

In our time it has rightly been emphasized: 'Hitler's War for Lebensraum was the greatest colonial war in history.' A colonial war that was first unleashed against Poland. . . . The turning point of the 'greatest colonial war in history' is Stalingrad. If Hitler was the proponent of the colonial counter-revolution, Stalin was the proponent of anti-colonial revolution that in a completely unexpected way found its center in Europe.²²

Losurdo also takes seriously the Chinese Communist Party's insistence that it has been using market mechanisms to "develop social wealth and the productive forces" on its road to building Chinese socialism. For Losurdo, China under the CCP is "the country that has emerged from the greatest anti-colonial revolution in history to engage in a long-term process of building a post-capitalist and socialist society."²³ In the growing conflict between China and the capitalist West, he puts a stark choice to his fellow radicals: "Which side will the Western left take?"²⁴ Whatever one might think of such positions, they are not those of a thinker keen on retrieving liberalism!

Unlike Mills, who believes it is still possible to sublimate liberalism's virtues in a higher, purified version of itself—black radical liberalism—Losurdo implies that despite its three major "strong points"—important for what Marxists can learn from them—liberalism cannot really be disentangled from its sordid history. 1) Its flexibility was necessitated by continual challenges from the left; 2) its interest in the limitation of power "went hand in hand with the delimitation of a restricted sacred space: nurturing a proud, exclusivist self-consciousness, the community of the freemen inhabiting it was led to regard enslavement, or more or less explicit subjection, imposed on the great mass dispersed throughout the profane space, as legitimate" (343)—a duality that continues to this day in the form of a transnational ruling class and impoverished working class under a global capitalism unchallenged by a globally "triumphant" and "hegemonic" liberalism; 3) "And in the name of the market"—even apart from the historical trade in slaves and indentured laborers—"workers' coalitions were

22. Losurdo, "Stalin and Hitler," 38–39.

23. Losurdo, "Has China Turned to Capitalism?," 29.

24. *Ibid.*

repressed and economic and social rights ignored and denied, with a consequent commodification of essential aspects of the human personality and human dignity (health, education, and so on)."²⁵

So one can see that for Losurdo, liberalism is neither globally triumphant and hegemonic nor is it worth retrieving. On the one hand, China holds aloft the red banner of communism as the de facto leader of the global movement for a "post-capitalist and socialist society." On the other hand—discredited by a shameful and ongoing history of exclusion—liberalism lies in ruins from which Marxists are exhorted to pluck the living flowers: its three major strong points.

In contrasting Mills and Losurdo, I am not uncritically endorsing the latter. Nor am I implying that the positions of these two radicals constitute our only options on the left. Such a procedure is, however, quite illuminating for getting at tensions in Mills's work. For instance, why does Mills find it so easy to slough off, even if only in principle, liberalism's sordid and racist history so as to retrieve it, while he does not even consider doing so for Marxism/communism and its similarly problematic history? As a potential answer, I am inclined to claim he was a victim of the liberal (Washington) consensus. Consider the following statement, originally made in the 2012 New Left Project interview mentioned earlier but included in 2017's *Black Rights/White Wrongs*:

The original left claim would have been that the imbrication of class and race is so thorough that a socialist revolution is required to get rid of racism. But the problem today, of course, is the discrediting of the left in a "post-Marxist" world without any attractive "post-capitalist" models. So could you have "fundamental social change" in the form of a revolutionary transition from white-supremacist capitalism (the dominant variety since modernity) to non-white-supremacist capitalism? I am hoping so, since a socialist revolution in the Marxist sense no longer seems likely, and the twentieth-century history of Stalinist regimes claiming the socialist label is a depressing one.²⁶

It seems that for Mills—to adapt Irving Kristol—a black radical liberal is a Marxist "mugged by reality!"²⁷ This is black radicalism in the world of TINA ("There Is No Alternative").²⁸

Mills reads Losurdo's book in this TINA mood, and so misses that Losurdo's project is precisely a response to such "depressive" post-Marxism. To radicals like Mills who now celebrate the Haitian revolution and its

25. Losurdo, *Liberalism*, 344.

26. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 9.

27. Murray, "A Liberal Mugged by Reality."

28. Varoufakis, "Capitalism Isn't Working."

leader Toussaint Louverture as heroic emancipatory symbols, while construing Stalin and “Stalinist regimes” as depressing reductios of Marxian socialism, Losurdo has a provocative retort, as we saw above: were not the leading communist regimes champions of anti-colonial revolution? They issued in brutal and repressive dictatorships that sometimes temporarily allied themselves with reactionary forces (e.g., the Hitler-Stalin pact), but this is something they have *in common* with Toussaint Louverture and Haiti:

Nearly one and a half centuries before the war unleashed by Hitler to subject and enslave the peoples of Eastern Europe, there certainly was another great war in another historical context whose aim was the restoration of colonial domination and slavery. It is the campaign commanded by Napoleon and entrusted to his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, against San Domingo, the island governed by the leader of the victorious revolution of the black slaves, Toussaint Louverture. Even after the 29th of August 1793, the day on which L. F. Sonthonax, the representative of revolutionary France proclaimed the abolishment of slavery on the island, Louverture continued to fight alongside with Spain; because he was suspicious of France the black leader . . . collaborated for a long time with a slaveholder-country of the Ancien Régime, that waged a war against the Jacobin Republic and the abolitionist power, which in the meantime had established itself in San Domingo. Even in the year 1799, he had, to save the country that he led from economic collapse, begun trade relations with Great Britain that waged a war against France and a possible victory of England would have had quite negative effects on the project of abolitionism. And yet, Toussaint Louverture always remains still the great protagonist of the anti-colonial and abolitionist revolutions and the antagonist of Leclerc (and of Napoleon). In spite of the completely transformed historical situation, one and a half centuries later, there is no reason to approach Stalin differently: The tortuosity of the historical processes must not lead us to lose track of the essential.

Even before the French invasion and foreseeing it, Toussaint Louverture enforced a relentless productivist dictatorship and repressed with an iron fist all challenges and attacks on his power; later the arrival of French expedition corps led by Leclerc was the beginning of a war that in the end became a war of extermination on both sides. . . . The category of totalitarianism does not become more convincing if it is employed as the only criterion of interpretation for a gigantic conflict between anti-colonial revolution and colonial counter-revolution, advocating slavery, which has raged in the first half of the 20th century.²⁹

29. Losurdo, “Stalin and Hitler,” 44–45.

In other words, if the accusation of totalitarianism fails to rob Toussaint Louverture and the revolutionary Haitian regime of their emancipatory luster, why should it succeed in the case of communism (“really existing socialism”)? For Losurdo it cannot, and so Hitler and Stalin are not “twin brothers”—as liberals like to claim—but “mortal enemies.”

With his *Liberalism* book Losurdo is similarly trying to forestall slippage from disillusion with Marxist regimes to an embrace of liberalism by showing that the history of liberal regimes offers no safe harbor for radicals undergoing an identity-crisis, and he probably also hopes to recruit some radical liberals for the Marxist camp. It is thus aimed directly at thinkers like Mills, who, in answer to socialist critics of his turn to liberalism, states that, “State-commandist socialism (a.k.a. “communism”) is indeed incompatible with liberalism but would seem to have been refuted as an attractive ideal by the history of the twentieth century.”³⁰ To this claim is appended a title-only citation to *The Black Book of Communism*,³¹ presumably meant to indicate that this is now a closed chapter of history, no more than a catalog of horrors. But I think Losurdo would say that such a move is not open to Mills, who after all celebrates Losurdo’s *Liberalism: A Counter-History*—a book which might as well be titled *The Black Book of Liberalism*—while nonetheless advocating liberalism’s retrieval.

By contrast, Losurdo dedicates an entire chapter of his 2015 book *War and Revolution: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* to pushing back against *The Black Book*’s demonization of communism. There he makes the case that it was the global communist movement that was in the forefront of opposing what Mills called the “Racial Contract” of global white supremacy:

The October Revolution effected a radical turn vis-a-vis an ideological and political tradition in which colonial arrogance and racial prejudice were a self-evident, undisputed fact. In these conditions, appeals for a liberation struggle addressed to the slaves of the colonies, and to the ‘barbarians’ present in the capitalist metropolis itself, was bound to seem a deadly threat to the white race, the West, and civilization as such. Bolshevism was perceived by much of the European and US press as a sworn enemy not of democracy per se, but of *Herrenvolk* democracy and, above all, of the global white supremacy on which the latter rested. Communists were branded and treated as renegades from the white race. An eminent member of the exclusive club of civilized peoples and the West when ruled by the Czarist autocracy and *ancien régime*, Russia became barbaric following the October Revolution and (in [Oswald] Spengler’s words) revealed itself to be ‘Asiatic,’ a member of the colonial world and ‘populations of colour.’

30. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 24.

31. See Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism*.

We can now understand what happened in the South of the USA. Even after Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president, the policy of segregation and lynching of blacks continued its ravages. Communists struggled against it and were branded as ‘foreigners’ and ‘nigger lovers’ by the dominant ideology. An American historian [Robin D. G. Kelley, in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*] describes the courage they were forced to display: ‘Their challenge to racism and to the status quo prompted a wave of repression one might think inconceivable in a democratic country.’ To be a Communist (and challenge white supremacy) meant ‘fac[ing] the possibility of imprisonment, beatings, kidnapping, and even death.’³²

Given this history, Losurdo can legitimately ask Mills: why is Marxism/communism a lost cause, while liberalism is retrievable?

Recall how Mills read Losurdo as agreeing with him:

So for Losurdo one can accept the indictment of actual historic liberalism, and its failure to live up to its putative universalism, without going on to conclude either that liberalism must therefore be abandoned or that liberalism’s own internal dynamic will naturally correct itself. Rather, the appropriate conclusion is that liberalism can be retrieved, but that it will take political struggle to do so.

We have now seen that this is a misreading. Interestingly, if we swapped “communism” for “liberalism” it would be much more accurate as a reading of Losurdo. Mills could have found that “the appropriate conclusion is that Marxism or communism can be retrieved, but that it will take political struggle to do so.” He might have negated 3) and 5) in a different version of the “Viability Argument,” concluding that Marxism should be adopted by those seeking emancipation. And yet, after his “turn” away from Marxism in favor of critical philosophy of race in the mid-nineties, Mills found such a conclusion increasingly untenable. Unlike Losurdo he failed to emphasize the noble anti-racist struggles of the Marxist and communist movements, instead becoming—like G. A. Cohen before him—a kind of “internal” critic of Rawlsian liberalism, if a “black radical” and even “socialist” one.

It seems to me that in all this Mills was motivated as much by pragmatism in the face of liberal capitalist triumphalism as he was by disappointment with the failures of “really existing socialism” (including Grenada³³). As already noted at the outset, Mills made a conscious decision to frame his position in a way that wouldn’t render him and his work a nonentity in academic philosophy. His resulting “black radical liberalism” was an

32. Losurdo, “The Black Book,” 293. The chapter was originally published in Italian in 1998, just one year after Mills’s *The Racial Contract*.

33. See Mills, “Getting Out of the Cave.”

attempt to thread the needle between a mainstream (white) liberalism, its radical (white) critics, and the Black perspective they had both neglected. But getting the ear of mainstream liberals meant repeating, or at least not directly challenging, their anti-Marxist mantras. I applaud Mills's considerable achievement in helping to make the Black experience more central to philosophy (and my own philosophizing), although in this would-be radical's humble opinion he conceded too much to the liberals—whither Black Marxism?³⁴

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34. In his taxonomy of Black political philosophies, Mills asserts that the "classic exegesis" of Black Marxism "can be found in Cedric Robinson's [1983] book on the subject, [which] attempts to situate [the] dynamic [of European colonialism and racial slavery] within a modified Marxist framework." See Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 202; and Robinson, *Black Marxism*. But this view is not uncontroversial among Black Marxists themselves, for whom Robinson is actually an anti-Marxist. For this reading of Robinson and in general a more robust and radical conception of Black Marxism, see McClendon, "Marxism in *Ebony* contra Black Marxism"; Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies*; and Shelby, "Afro-Analytical Marxism and the Problem of Race."

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