



Tommie Shelby. *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xvi + 320 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01936-2.

Reviewed by Bryan Sinche (Department of English, University of Hartford)

Published on H-Amstdy (October, 2007)

A Pragmatic Black Solidarity for the Twenty-First Century

Social scientists, literary historians, and cultural critics have long been fascinated by the meaning of “blackness” and the uses—both liberatory and nefarious—to which that malleable concept has been put. *We Who Are Dark* by Harvard philosopher Tommie Shelby explores “blackness” and finds in it the roots of a pragmatic black solidarity that can effect political change. The book, a compelling philosophical investigation of black solidarity’s origins, manifestations, and prospects, emerges from Shelby’s conviction that “the concept of race, as commonly understood, [is] a problematic foundation for African American identity and black political solidarity” (p. xi). The author attempts to ascertain the basis (or bases) on which blacks can unite to combat prejudice, ultimately focusing on a black solidarity that has as its goal the remediation of antiblack racism. Believing that “philosophy could be used to rethink the normative basis of black self-understanding and group unity” (p. xi), Shelby writes both a survey of black philosophy and a work of philosophy in its own right. As such, *We Who Are Dark* engages with authors familiar to scholars of literature, history, and politics as well as American and African American Studies, though it does not offer critical commentary on these writers as much as it uses them to build its own philosophical argument.

Hopeful that his new black solidarity will avoid the problems of classic black nationalism and other race-based movements, Shelby focuses much of his critical attention on devising a solidarity that is neither sexist, gender-biased, classist, nor otherwise limited by intra-group factionalism. In doing so, he rejects three major components of past black solidarity movements. First, he denies the importance of shared African identity; second, he critiques the Black Power conception of solidarity as impractical, unrealistic, and possibly detrimental; and third, he argues against the idea of a widely shared black identity (which he is careful to distinguish from African identity). Asserting instead that “we should separate the

need for an emancipatory black solidarity from the demand for a common black identity,” Shelby insists that black solidarity be “based strictly on the shared experience of racial oppression and a joint commitment to resist it” (pp. 11-12). In other words, Shelby insists that while shared experience does not thereby create shared identity, it can serve as a basis for political solidarity. He acknowledges the modest hopes for this new black solidarity when he writes that such a “solidarity conceives of black political unity as limited in scope ... because this is as much as African Americans can reasonably expect from black unity in the post-civil rights era” (p. 13). Though it frankly addresses this new model’s efficacy, Shelby’s focused and disciplined book may leave readers wanting more than a limited set of possibilities and potentialities; perhaps readers expect a solidarity that can spur wide-ranging, or even revolutionary, changes.

We Who Are Dark begins with an historical overview of black nationalism, of which Shelby delineates two types. The first, which he labels “classical nationalism,” is a strong nationalist position with the goal of a self-determining black community; the second, dubbed “pragmatic nationalism” (with which Shelby aligns himself), strives to establish a just society in which the black community can live and flourish as equals. Martin Delany, whose work lies at the center of Shelby’s first chapter, favored both types of nationalism at different points in his life and career, though he embraced pragmatic nationalism after the Civil War. Such a nationalism requires neither emigration nor a shared expressive culture—that is, a set of aesthetic, linguistic, stylistic, or social commonalities—but a shared political culture rooted in the common experience of racially motivated oppression. Moving on from Delany, Shelby examines the writings of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey, each of whom embraced different positions along a continuum of solidarity. Shelby aligns himself most closely with DuBois (from whose “Crite-

ria of Negro Art" (1926) the title of this book is drawn) because DuBoisian solidarity, according to Shelby, "requires political self-assertion and persistent agitation in support of the group's ideals" and that the group be defined by external racial characteristics (p. 77). These two notions are central to Shelby's arguments, especially the idea that black phenotypic characteristics are, in DuBois's words, "stigmata of degradation" and thus the only necessary basis for black solidarity.

Continuing his examination of historical black nationalisms, Shelby evaluates the Black Power movement and the Nation of Islam along with the primary advocates for those movements: Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), Charles Hamilton, and Malcolm X. Black solidarity was an important common goal for these more recent philosophers. Carmichael and Hamilton especially embraced the idea of group solidarity and independence from the white community as well as the idea of speaking with one voice in the public sphere. Shelby dismisses the foundations of black communal solidarity as "hopelessly utopian" (p. 115) because such an approach would require altruistic sacrifices by the "black elites" who would have to forsake economic and social advantages to live in all-black communities. Even if the so-called elites were willing to leave whatever arrangements they have and become part of a new, all-black residential community, they might then disproportionately impact the community. This undue influence is problematic for Shelby because it violates his prized tenets of inclusiveness and equality. Similar problems override, for Shelby, the possibility of a single representative black voice speaking for the community. In the end, Shelby claims that blacks "must not rely on racially exclusive strategies for improving the life prospects of black people" (p. 131). He insists that black nationalism and black power are not worthy ends in themselves, but flawed means to the desired end of racial justice.

Having shown how previous attempts at solidarity have failed, or would fail, to meet the needs of contemporary African Americans, Shelby goes on to delineate a new "trans-institutional" program for black solidarity. Dismissing the ideal of institutional autonomy favored by classic nationalists, he endorses a "joint commitment on the part of individual blacks to maintain solidarity with one another regardless of the racial composition of the political organizations in which each one participates" (p. 138). The benefits of such a method are obvious: Blacks would exert power within a variety of organizations and thereby have a greater influence on larger cultural and political structures. At the same time, such a method relies on individual agency, limits univocal representa-

tion, and makes obsolete race-based organizations. Still, Shelby finds this method preferable because it encourages blacks to fight both the problem of antiblack racism as well as the economic, legal, and social injustices that affect all races. Anxious not to conflate an issue such as poverty with racism, Shelby sees his method as a way to de-racialize particular issues, thereby avoiding conflict with political allies who are unsympathetic to explicitly "black" causes.

In the final chapters of *We Who Are Dark*, Shelby addresses what "black" means (and does not mean) for his imagined black solidarity. In so doing, he dismisses many traits that have come to define "blackness" for men and women on both sides of the color line. For example, Shelby denies the efficacy of a "cultural blackness" that posits a distinct, deeply rooted, emancipatory cultural tradition that should be controlled and interpreted by blacks. Though he may be correct in suggesting that cultural blackness is not a precondition for black solidarity, Shelby reveals a troubling willingness to accept the exploitation and co-optation of traditionally "black" modes of cultural expression, arguing that "it is not clear ... through what mechanisms blacks could gain and maintain ... control" over them (p. 195). And, though he correctly points out that traditionally black modes of expression are not enjoyed or produced exclusively by blacks, Shelby seems unwilling to admit that the dissolution of ethnocultural blackness is perhaps a greater problem for blacks in the culture industry than the fact that the black bourgeoisie who control that industry might not be committed to "democratic decision making" (p. 196). Though just one example of this mode of argument, such a line of thought reveals a key facet of the mode of solidarity espoused in *We Who Are Dark*: Shelby's commitment to perfectly democratic intragroup politics despite the predominance of anti-democratic practices in the contemporary United States.

Dismissing communitarian, Afrocentric, and ethnocultural "modes of blackness" as possible bases for a democratic black solidarity movement, Shelby argues that the only sufficiently capacious and democratic definition of blackness is "thin blackness," which depends on phenotypic characteristics and the personal experience of antiblack racism. In other words, if one looks black and contends with racism, that person is black. Thin blackness provides the basis for the Shelby's new black solidarity, a solidarity that can unite African Americans in spite of economic and class heterogeneity, a solidarity that solves the problems of scope, mission, and membership that plagued past solidarity movements. Though Shelby's model might well have these salutary

effects, it might also replace standards of cultural blackness with standards of another sort. To say nothing of the very real problem of relying upon phenotype as an index of blackness, one wonders whether a black person who contended with significantly less racism than a peer would be classed as sufficiently black to enlist in a black solidarity movement. This is not to suggest that “thin blackness” is without merit, or that Shelby’s criticism of other modes of definition is unwarranted, but rather to confirm that almost any method used to define race is potentially flawed. Moreover, Shelby seems to have traded inclusiveness—which is one of his requirements for his black solidarity—for effectiveness. Whatever the limitations of the Black Power movement might have been, it possessed a clear mission and committed members, and *We Who Are Dark* is vulnerable to several questions along those lines. Might the interests of black Americans be better served by small, dedicated organizations rather than the widespread affiliations that Shelby imagines? Might the American political arena still have a place for black organizations that agitate for the remediation of social ills that disproportionately affect African-Americans? Might such organizations be stronger and more committed were they made up of people who share economic, cultural, regional, or religious commonalities? While such groups cannot speak for the whole of black America, they might do the most for the majority of black Americans. In the end, Shelby’s endorsement of thin blackness as the basis of a new black solidarity does not inspire him to proclaim it a panacea, and he closes his final chapter with a tepid endorsement: “I am not suggesting that ... pragmatic black solidarity would be sufficient to eliminate racism. Indeed, it might

be that nothing blacks do, even with the help of members from other ethnoracial groups, will end antiblack racism” (p. 242).

So, Shelby’s book closes not with a triumphant announcement but a weary admission that is as frustrating as it is apt. This frustration stems from the fact that antiblack racism is not the only problem facing blacks in the twenty-first century United States, just as the problems facing them are not unique to the black community. These problems require attention from multiracial political groups that can combat economic injustice, unfair labor practices, substandard public education, and urban poverty. Shelby’s solidarity could, ideally, help move these issues to the center of the national debate while insisting that the problem of antiblack racism must also be addressed. Those two goals are worthy ones, but in separating the issue of racism from many of its effects, he may also mask the significant relationships between racial injustice and other forms of injustice. Ultimately, I was impressed by Shelby’s thorough and careful arguments, and I was enlightened by his informative survey of past black solidarity movements, but I remain skeptical that a limited black solidarity rooted in thin blackness is the answer to the issue of antiblack racism or that such a solidarity offers the prospect of political efficacy. Of course, solving such problems is complicated and difficult, and it is an impressive accomplishment to suggest meaningful steps toward a solution. Shelby does just that as he imagines a pragmatic solidarity that will address thorny social issues outside of a purely racial context while insisting that whites and blacks alike work to remedy antiblack racism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Bryan Sinche. Review of Shelby, Tommie, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13643>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.