

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Racial Contract

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Mills, C. W. (1997). [Chapter 1]. In *The racial contract* (pp. 9–40). Cornell University Press.

Comment

In the introduction (not included in the assigned reading) to his influential *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills provides the following context:

We all understand the idea of a “contract,” an agreement between two or more people to do something. The “social contract” just extends this idea. If we think of human beings as starting off in a “state of nature,” it suggests that they then *decide* to establish civil society and a government. What we have, then, is a theory that founds government on the popular consent of individuals taken as equals.

But the peculiar contract to which I am referring, though based on the social contract tradition that has been central to Western political theory, is not a contract between everybody (“we the people”), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people (“we the white people”). So it is a Racial Contract.

The social contract, whether in its original [e.g., Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau] or in its contemporary version [e.g., David Gauthier, John Rawls, and Robert Nozick], constitutes a powerful set of lenses for looking at society and the government. But in its obfuscation of the ugly realities of group power and domination, it is, if unsupplemented, a profoundly misleading account of the way the modern world actually is and came to be. The “Racial Contract” as a theory—I use quotation marks to indicate when I am talking about the theory of the Racial Contract, as against the Racial Contract itself—will explain that the Racial Contract is real and that apparent racist violations of the terms of the social contract in fact *uphold* the terms of the Racial Contract. [Mills, 1997, pp. 3–4]

In chapter 1 (the assigned reading), Mills then goes on to flesh out the nature of the Racial Contract, its relation to social contract theory, and how it is a very real historical phenomenon whose impact continues today.

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. In the first section of chapter 1, Charles Mills distinguishes between the three following contracts within the social contract:
 - A. The political contract,
 - B. The moral contract, and
 - C. The epistemological contract.

What does Mills mean by each of these? How are they different? How are they interconnected? According to Mills, how do each of these appear in the social contract? In the Racial Contract?

2. In contemporary political philosophy, the classical versions of social contract theory (in Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) are typically thought to be historically dubious, being mere fiction. As a result, 20th-century social contract theorists (like David Gauthier, John Rawls, and Robert Nozick) all adopt an approach involving *hypothetical* (and not historically accurate) contracts. However, in the second section of chapter 1, Mills claims that the Racial Contract *is* historically real and is neither fiction nor hypothetical. What is his argument justifying that claim?
3. Finally, in the third section of chapter 3, Mills argues that the Racial Contract is an economic exploitation contract. In what sense is the social contract an economic contract? In the Racial Contract, how does this economic contract transform into an exploitation contract?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.