

Racism and Liberalism: Comments on Brian Thomas's "Post-Rawlsian Movements,
Multiculturalism, and Black Americans"

Bruce Ballard

Brian Thomas makes a convincing case for the inadequacy of Will Kymlicka's social philosophy in relation to the problems of racism Black Americans and Canadians face. As Thomas notes, Kymlicka fails both in his diagnosis of the problem and in his suggested remedies. Yet Thomas finds enough worthwhile in Kymlicka to try and refit the theory in relation to racism. Here I will argue that Thomas may be unduly optimistic.

Contemporary communitarianism arose in part as a reaction against liberalism. And while there are thinkers who have tried to draw from both theories, it isn't clear that a coherent synthesis is possible. The two may be incommensurable. Kymlicka wants to add to the rational self-interested individual of liberal theory a narratively situated individual whose good or well-being is understood only within a particular narrative tradition. Thus Kymlicka is prepared to acknowledge group rights, unlike traditional liberalism.

But how is this addition to be effected? In the service of the liberal individualist ideal, apparently. We are to acknowledge group rights when we recognize the importance of particular social contexts for the development and practice of autonomy, a liberal, individualist good. Kymlicka's theory recognizes the individual as the primary unit of value along with the primacy of liberal goods like equality, autonomy, and freedom.

Here I want to argue that liberalism as a social philosophy lacks the resources to reconstruct itself in face of devastating critiques by philosophers like Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre. On this account, Kymlicka's theoretical shortfall in respect of anti-black racism will be both predictable and irreparable.

For MacIntyre and Sandel, liberal individualism represents a misleading and impoverished view of the self and society. The liberal self has individual freedom as its highest good. Hence the choices it makes are sovereign, ultimately unimpeachable by others. Freedom of choice is seen as good in itself. As Sandel puts it, there is a virtual religion of self-worship here. This self is essentially individual or atomic. All its relations to others are voluntary and revocable, none constitutive. Hence it will be slow to act the citizen, quick to divorce, inclined to consign aging parents to the care of strangers, inclined to neglect children in favor of its individual pursuits or even to abort their lives should they interfere with its plans.

But this decontextualized, dehistoricized, deracialized, denationalized, stripped-down self is the idealized hallucination of liberalism. As Plato shows so well in *the Republic*, societies are like factories for producing a certain type of individual. In this society, success can mean greater isolation from others (cf. Philip Slater's *Pursuit of Loneliness*). Isolated, we oscillate between what Robert Bellah et al termed competitive individualism at work and expressive individualism at home.

Is it any wonder then that the liberal self neither recognizes nor particularly acknowledges its own implication in the group harm of racism? Thus the familiar white disavowal: "I never held slaves or engaged in prejudicial practices, hence am innocent of my society's racist track record." But like it or not, the actual history of African America and its legacy to this day affords these whites an artificial, unearned advantage. Just as we may inherit certain social goods, so we may inherit social debts, a concept unavailable either in concept or disposition to the liberal self. Individualist stories about the self to the contrary notwithstanding, in actuality we are very much defined by our relations to others, perhaps most especially by those we have not elected.

The liberal notion of justice suffers similar maladies. Alasdair MacIntyre diagnoses these problems in his four stage description of liberalist justice. At the first level, individuals and groups simply express their preferences. So, for example, some Americans favor affirmative action while others do not. A rational address of differences at this level would require philosophical investigation and argument. But the liberalist obscures this need by reducing various positions about the good to mere preferences, as in a market system. Within such a system of preferences the ability to bargain becomes paramount. Anyone without the needed means to do so will be quite disadvantaged in liberalist society. The disadvantage will be greatest for economically marginalized minorities. Bargaining takes place through non-rational persuasion as the only kind available once claims of rational rightness are reduced to preference.

At the second level of liberal justice, preferences are tallied (as in utilitarianism) to determine what should be done. Such a vote would ideally tell us what to do regarding affirmative action programs, for instance. MacIntyre notes that such a tally presupposes a shared notion of rational principles. But if the various preferences are conclusions of conflicting philosophies, they are more than preferences: they are products of practical reasoning. To treat them as mere opinions is irrational and to tally them up together with the conclusions of antagonistic rivals absurd. So the lack of a shared rationality about the tally leaves it unsupported.

The third level of liberal justice is the debate between liberalists about what counts as a fair method for weighing preferences. Corrections for inequality such as affirmative action are debated at this level. As MacIntyre notes, the various liberal theories about this matter are as much at odds with each other as ever. So it is more the fact that such debate goes on, rather than any substantive conclusions, that is supposed to justify the liberalist procedures. Yet since these

deliberations are ultimately about practical policies, there has to be a tie-breaker between conflicting views.

The fourth level breaks the tie. The fourth level involves appeals to the rules and procedures of the legal system. We could take our affirmative action case to the Supreme Court, for example. The fourth level functions to enforce liberalist conflict resolution without invoking an overarching concept of the good or, rather, by pretending not to do so.

How then is Thomas able to make out the salient contours of anti-black racism where Kymlicka falls short? Thomas provides a thicker description of the black predicament by reference to the relevant narrative setting and history, describing a people, not simply a collection of individuals. This portrayal reflects a different frame of reference from the liberal, one more social and communitarian, the same frame reflected in documents like the Black National Anthem. Were this implicit frame developed sufficiently, it would provide a superior alternative to liberalism.