

The Racial Contract



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES W. MILLS

Philosopher Charles W. Mills was born and raised in Jamaica, where he studied physics at the University of the West Indies and went on to teach science in local high schools and colleges for several years. He eventually switched to philosophy and completed his PhD at the University of Toronto, where he wrote a dissertation on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's theory of ideology. He briefly taught at the University of Oklahoma before moving to the University of Illinois at Chicago, Northwestern University, and the City University of New York, where he is a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy as of 2020. He was also the president of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association from 2017–2018. *The Racial Contract* was Mills's first book but remains his most widely read work. It also won a Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award. Mills's next book, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, extended *The Racial Contract's* emphasis on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy's influential role in the history of Western philosophy. Mills also went on to publish *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (an essay collection on critical race theory) and *Radical Theory, Caribbean Reality: Race, Class and Social Domination* (a collection of articles about race and class relations in the Caribbean). Most recently, in 2017, Mills published *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*, in which he builds on *The Racial Contract's* critique of European and American liberal philosophy. As of 2020, Mills is reportedly working on a sequel to *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Racial Contract critiques the European Enlightenment, a 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement that gave rise to liberalism, the philosophy of individual freedom, political equality, and capitalism that's still dominant in Europe and North America today. Although liberalism is primarily associated with philosopher John Locke, the other theorists whom Mills analyzes in *The Racial Contract*—Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant—were affiliated with Enlightenment thought and liberalism. Through the titular concept of the racial contract, Mills points out that these philosophers did not truly intend to extend the liberal ideals of freedom and equality to all people. By looking at the way these ideals were twisted and violated through colonialism and slavery, Mills argues that liberalism was actually only intended for white people. He covers an extraordinarily large slice of global history—roughly the last 500 years—in order to show

the broad trend of European and American colonialism throughout history. Although many colonies in the Americas became independent in the 18th and 19th centuries, most European and U.S. colonies in Africa and Asia did not gain independence until after World War II—and many economic and political imbalances established through colonization continue today. This is why Mills argues that, although colonialism has technically ended in most of the world, and the globe appears to have entered a post-white-supremacy age, the present is really just an age of de facto white supremacy. Even in the modern day, former colonial powers continue to run the global economy for their own benefit.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *The Racial Contract*, Mills draws on the work of four major 17th- and 18th-century philosophers who developed the social contract theory. The first of these four theorists was Thomas Hobbes, who presented his theory in [Leviathan](#). He was followed by John Locke in the [Second Treatise of Government](#), Jean-Jacques Rousseau in [The Social Contract](#), and Immanuel Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Mills also pays special attention to contemporary social contract theories, like John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Robert Nozick soon followed with a libertarian critique of Rawls in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Mills also cites a wide range of philosophers, historians, and other theorists whose work is relevant to his critique of the social contract theory. Most notably, Mills's argument that white people collectively built Western societies through an agreement to subjugate non-white people builds on feminist philosopher Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*. In this book, Pateman argued that modern societies are really based on a kind of "sexual contract" that creates systemic gender inequality. Pateman and Mills also collaborated on a book, *Contract and Domination*, in which they combined their theories into a more general critique of social contract theory. Finally, Mills view his own work as part of a tradition of Black, Indigenous, and Third World political theorists like W.E.B. DuBois ([The Souls of Black Folk](#)) and Frantz Fanon ([Black Skin, White Masks](#)). He also cites a number of more recent theorists, including Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Lewis Gordon (*Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (*The Signifying Monkey*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Racial Contract
- **When Written:** 1989–1997
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Illinois and Norman, Oklahoma

- **When Published:** 1997
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Political Philosophy
- **Antagonist:** White supremacy; racism; colonialism; slavery
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Mills by Any Other Name. Charles Wade Mills should not be confused with the 20th-century American sociologist Charles Wright Mills (usually credited as C. Wright Mills), who is best known for his book *The Sociological Imagination*. Charles W. Mills's name could also be confused with the 19th-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose writings (though very different from Mills's) were also a response to Enlightenment philosophy.



PLOT SUMMARY

According to conventional theories of the social contract, a group of people forms a society when they voluntarily and collectively agree to protect one another's rights and freedoms. However, Mills points out that these theories are often blind to race, which is a problem, because racial exploitation is the historical foundation of most modern societies. So, when philosophers treat race and racism as irrelevant to the structure of an ideal society, they miss the fact that racism is the precise reason why societies have not been able to meet that ideal. In contrast, Mills proposes the racial contract theory as a way of explaining the modern world's structure of global politics, economics, and social power.

The racial contract is an agreement between white people that creates a white supremacist society, or one in which white people control the vast majority of power, wealth, and privilege. In the racial contract, white men declare themselves equals with equal rights, while defining non-white people as subhumans who do not deserve those same rights. By dividing humanity, the racial contract establishes a government by and for white people, who rule over non-white people and exploit their land and resources. White people justify this system by perpetuating the racist idea that non-white people are inferior.

Over the last 500 years, Europeans have used this strategy to systematically colonize the rest of the world—that is, to seize land and resources and enslave people. They have justified taking non-white people's land by arguing that only white men are morally capable of truly owning property, and they legalized slavery based on the notion that it would benefit uncivilized non-white people. For more than 500 years, nations built on white supremacy had dual governments: one set of rules applied to "white/persons" and another to "nonwhite/subpersons." This has created an enormous divide in wealth and power between developed white countries and developing

non-white countries, as well as between white and non-white people in diverse countries like the U.S.

The racial contract hasn't just denied economic opportunities to non-white people: it has enabled white people to build wealth by exploiting non-white people. Through slavery, expropriation, and colonization, Europeans seized control of (and profited off of) non-white people's labor, land, and wealth. Mills argues that this is the source of most white people's wealth today—for instance, in the U.S., Black people lost out several trillions of dollars of household wealth because of legally mandated slavery and discrimination. Racism isn't just personal prejudice or an unfortunate deviation from the norm of equality for all: it's the political and economic foundation of the contemporary world order.

Under the racial contract, white people learn to see the world in a specific way, which helps justify the genocide, slavery, and colonization that bring them power and privilege. This worldview divides the world into "civilized" and "**savage**" places and peoples, as well as white persons and non-white subpersons. These prejudices aren't limited to popular culture, politics, and the law—religion, science, and philosophy also played a crucial role in shaping them over time. In fact, Mills argues that the Enlightenment philosophers who originally developed the social contract theory—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant—were *really* talking about a racial contract. Even while these thinkers argued that the social contract would guarantee equality for all persons, they argued that non-white people were subhuman savages unfit for living in civilized society. So, they were really just defending the racial contract by disguising it as a social contract.

Mills points out that today, white people do much the same thing by insisting that racism no longer exists and was a deviation from the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality for all. In reality, the racial contract has never offered freedom and equality to nonwhite people: instead, it has subjugated them through violence (genocide and slavery) and "ideological conditioning." The latter involves teaching non-white people to accept their inferior status through the education system and public discourse.

Mills hopes that philosophers can help undo this conditioning by analyzing society through the lens of a racial contract. However, the purpose of ideological conditioning is to *prevent* people from understanding how the racial contract works, distorting people's perceptions in order to prevent them from distinguishing right from wrong. For instance, much like the Enlightenment philosophers Mills has discussed, many white people learn to assume that they are naturally superior to non-white people, so they consider it correct to apply different sets of moral principles to white people and non-white people. White people also tend not to learn very much about the history of European conquest, slavery, imperialism, and global war that enabled white people to capture the majority of the

world's resources and wealth. In contrast, non-white people tend to clearly understand the racial contract, which gives them a kind of cognitive privilege relative to white people. For centuries, Black, Indigenous, and Third World writers and activists have pointed out that white supremacy is the driving force of contemporary politics.

Ultimately, Mills proposes that philosophers should start talking about the racial contract rather than the social contract, because it's a more useful theory for understanding society and planning to improve it. Nevertheless, most white philosophers continue to theorize about an ideal society in which racism doesn't exist, instead of addressing the realities of the society they actually live in. They assume that their own perspectives are neutral, objective, and authoritative. Meanwhile, they ignore the theories that anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and Indigenous thinkers have produced about contemporary society. In contrast, the racial contract theory is part of this tradition, and it gives all people—regardless of race—the opportunity to take a stand for or against white supremacy.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Charles W. Mills – Mills, a Caribbean social and political philosopher, is the author of *The Racial Contract*. Born in Jamaica, Mills received his bachelor's degree in physics from the University of West Indies as well as a PhD in philosophy from the University of Toronto. Much of his philosophical writing challenges mainstream philosophy and focuses on fundamentally restructuring society (as opposed to just imagining an ideal society). Mills is particularly interested in how social categories like class, gender, and race have divided people throughout history, and how those divides still affect people's lives in the modern day. In addition, he has a special focus on the role that race and class play in the Caribbean region. In *The Racial Contract*, Mills's goal is to explain the titular racial contract theory: the idea that organized society is based not on people's collective agreement to be governed (as the social contract theory states), but on formal and informal agreements among white people to divide humanity into racial groups and uphold white supremacy. He presents his theory in conversation with Enlightenment philosophers—like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—who are commonly believed to have advocated for liberal principles like freedom, but whom Mills argues only applied these principles to white people. In addition to writing numerous books on topics like critical race theory, colonialism, and class relations, Mills has also taught physics at The University of Technology, Jamaica and philosophy at Campion College, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Northwestern University.

Thomas Hobbes – Hobbes was the 17th-century English

philosopher who first accounted for the origins of society through a social contract in his 1651 book *Leviathan*. He famously argued that people live “nasty, brutish, and short” lives in the state of nature, which he imagined as a state of war. As a result, Hobbes argued that people would choose to submit to a ruler in order to avoid the state of war. While he contended that the state of nature was a hypothetical concept, he also claimed that “**savage** people” in the Americas were still living in it. Mills suggests that Hobbes only considered the state of nature hypothetical for white people, whom he thought of as rational because they voluntarily chose to form societies. Because Hobbes erroneously thought that non-white people didn't live in organized societies, he believed that they were not rational enough to escape the state of nature. In turn, he thought that white people were justified in imposing society on non-white people.

John Locke – Locke was an influential 17th-century English philosopher and doctor who developed a theory of the social contract (the idea that people voluntarily form societies as a means of protecting their rights) in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Locke argued that this social contract was a reflection of people's mutual respect for the natural laws of property and money. He argued that “Industrious and Rational” people had a natural right to own land, but he concluded that Native people were not sufficiently “Industrious and Rational” to have property rights because they did not cultivate their land like Europeans. This justified the European theft of Native people's lands, or the expropriation contract. Locke also personally supported and invested in the slave trade, which leads Mills to conclude that Locke did not intend on including non-white people in his vision of a society governed by a mutual respect for human rights.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – Rousseau was an influential 18th-century Swiss-French philosopher who developed a democratic theory of the social contract. Famous for imagining people in the state of nature as “noble **savages**” and criticizing the inequalities that arose within civilized society, Rousseau nevertheless argued that only non-white people could be noble savages. He justified this assumption by insisting that Europeans had superior metallurgy and agriculture, which Mills points out is historically inaccurate.

Immanuel Kant – Kant was an 18th-century German philosopher who is widely considered the founder of modern philosophy. He argued that an ethical community must be based on people recognizing their mutual rationality and therefore their inherent equality. However, in his lectures on anthropology, Kant also invented the modern hierarchy of races and explicitly defined non-white people as subhuman and incapable of rational thought. Mill concludes that, even though Kant developed the modern concept of a society based on autonomy and freedom, he also popularized the racist notion that non-white people are inherently inferior.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jules Harmand – Harmand was a French theorist. In the early 20th century, he defended European colonialism based on the racist assumption that white people are inherently superior to non-white people.

TERMS

Social Contract – The social contract is a philosophical explanation for the way societies form and why government authority over individuals is legitimate. Essentially, social contract theorists argue that people collectively agree to form or join a society in order to protect their rights. The racial contract is **Charles W. Mills's** response to the social contract theory: it's intended to show that, as a matter of historical fact, white people formed societies to protect their rights at the expense of non-white people.

Racial Contract – The titular and central concept in **Mills's** book, the racial contract is a body of formal and informal agreements among white people that establish and maintain a white supremacist society (in which white people permanently control the majority of power and wealth). It divides humanity into racial groups, categorizing white people as deserving freedom and full rights and non-white people as subhuman and undeserving of the same rights or liberties. According to Mills, the racial contract is made up of several different elements: the expropriation contract, the slavery contract, and the colonial contract.

State of Nature – In social contract theory, state of nature is a term for the way people lived before they formed organized societies.

White Supremacy – White supremacy is a political order in which white people rule society for their own benefit. In white supremacist societies, white people accumulate power, wealth, and privilege by exploiting or enslaving non-white people, or by taking land and resources from non-white cultures. White supremacist *beliefs* are ideas that justify this arrangement by suggesting that white people deserve disproportionate power and wealth because they are inherently superior to non-white people.

Expropriation Contract – The expropriation contract is one dimension of the historical racial contract. It's a set of legal agreements that white people used to dispossess non-white people of their land and resources. For instance, in the Americas, European settlers deemed that native people weren't capable of having true property rights, and that it was therefore legal to take native people's land.

Slavery Contract – The slavery contract is one part of the historical racial contract, in which white Europeans gave themselves the right to legally enslave non-white people (especially African and American Indian people) based on the

idea that they were inherently inferior to white people.

Colonial Contract – The colonial contract is one element of the historical racial contract, in which Europeans granted themselves the legal right to rule territories outside Europe. This was based on the racist idea that non-white people weren't capable of forming civilized societies and therefore needed to be ruled over by white people.

Epistemology – Epistemology is a field of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge. The central concern of epistemology is the distinction between belief and opinion. In *The Racial Contract*, **Mills** argues that the titular racial contract has an epistemological component, in that it dictates how people view knowledge and understand the world through the lens of race.



THEMES

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GLOBAL WHITE SUPREMACY

In *The Racial Contract*, political philosopher Charles W. Mills argues that the modern world is built on white supremacy, a political system that creates power, wealth, and privilege for white people by exploiting non-white people's labor, land, and resources. Slavery, colonialism, and segregation provide the clearest evidence of how white supremacist governments redistributed wealth and power from non-white non-Europeans to white Europeans, but Mills argues that white supremacy continues to reign today. This explains why a small minority of the human population—comprised mostly of Europeans and their descendants living in industrialized countries—still controls the majority of global wealth and power. Based on his critical analysis of classical European social contract theory, Mills proposes thinking of this global white supremacy as based on a racial contract, or an agreement among white people to treat one another as human and protect one another's rights, while treating non-white people as subhumans without rights. Mills concludes that the racial contract is a historically accurate and politically useful explanation for white supremacy's existence, and he shows that white supremacy explains the profound racial inequalities in today's global economy.

Mills argues that the racial contract historically created a system of global white supremacy by dividing humanity into two groups—white humans and non-white subhumans—and then distributing political rights and liberties based on this distinction. Mills characterizes the racial contract as a collective

agreement among white people that is enacted over time through a series of texts (like religious proclamations, philosophical tracts, and especially legal codes). Through these texts, white people establish that they deserve disproportionate rights, power, and wealth in society compared to non-white people. In other words, they establish a white supremacist political system. Mills argues that the racial contract's primary purpose is economic: having disproportionate rights and privileges makes it legal for white people to exploit non-white people, take their land, and steal their material resources.

Mills distinguishes three main historical versions of this racial contract: "the expropriation contract," "the slavery contract," and "the colonial contract." All of these give white people economic advantages by creating a two-tiered system of rights and liberties. The expropriation contract refers to the set of legal agreements through which Europeans decided that native non-European people could not exercise property rights. This made it legal for Europeans to take non-Europeans' land, because it created a two-tiered legal system in which Europeans could possess land, but non-Europeans couldn't. The slavery contract refers to the legal processes in which courts gave white citizens the legal right to enslave non-white people, based on the idea that non-white people were inferior and did not have human rights, or even that they needed to be civilized through slavery. This made slavery a legal, regulated business and profoundly shaped the modern world. In the slavery contract's two-tiered system, white men could own property, whereas non-white people could only ever *be* property. Finally, the colonial contract refers to the legal procedures through which Europeans gave themselves the right to rule the rest of the world, based on the notion that they alone were civilized and capable of democracy. The colonial contract created its own two-tiered system, in which white people could rule societies autonomously, but non-white people could only ever obey white rulers.

After explaining how the racial contract establishes white supremacist rule—government by and for white people—Mills argues that this racial contract persists today by showing that global white supremacy is still a dominant force in world politics. Mills argues that white supremacy accounts for the global differences in economic development and political power between the majority white nations of the so-called Global North (Europe, North America, and Australia) and the predominantly non-white developing nations of the Global South. This disparity can be traced directly back to the expropriation, slavery, and colonial contracts. Through the expropriation contract, white settlers seized legal control of all the land in countries like Australia and the United States, while the slavery contract allowed white slave owners to benefit from enslaved non-white people's labor for centuries. Through the colonial contract, all the profits from economic activity in

colonies outside Europe ultimately flowed to and got reinvested in Europe. This accounts for Europe's historical and present-day economic power. Accordingly, Europe's wealth and power aren't accidental, and they don't testify to Europe's inherent virtues: rather, they're simply what Europe has gained from imposing white supremacist rule on the rest of the world for centuries. These global imbalances in wealth and power are currently growing, not shrinking. Mills attributes this to the fact that financial institutions and multinational corporations in the Global North set the rules of the global economy for their own benefit. In rich nations, white people also discriminate against non-white people, through both legal mechanisms like immigration restrictions and informal mechanisms like discrimination. This means that the redistribution of wealth from majority-non-white countries to majority-white countries (and non-white people to white people within white countries) continues just as before.

The Racial Contract is primarily an account of the contemporary world order and its underlying political ideology: white supremacy, which is based on a racial contract. Although the expropriation, slavery, and colonial contracts no longer fully apply in contemporary times, the European and American countries that hold the majority of global power (despite having a small minority of the global population) continue to wield this power primarily for their own benefit. With this, Mill emphasizes that white supremacy still stubbornly persists, and the racial contract is still an accurate and useful way to understand the political systems under which most contemporary people live.



RACISM IN PHILOSOPHY

Charles W. Mills presents his theory of the racial contract as an alternative to the social contract, which is a common explanation for the formation of society in European and American political philosophy. Contemporary philosophers imagine the social contract as a race-neutral agreement among people who all agree to view one another as equals. In contrast, Mills describes the racial contract as an explicitly white supremacist agreement among white men, as he believes this more accurately reflects the real course of human history. He also thinks that this is really what Enlightenment social contract theorists like Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant had in mind. Therefore, Mills argues not only that the racial contract theory is more accurate and politically useful than the raceless social contract theory, but also that replacing the social contract theory with the racial contract theory is an important step towards addressing the pervasive racism in both historical and contemporary philosophy.

Mills argues that the racial contract is a superior theory to the social contract because it more accurately describes the actual world and better fulfills the goals of political philosophy. First,

the racial contract is more accurate than the raceless social contract because it faithfully represents the way governments and global power structures have formed over the last 500 years. Mainstream social contract theorists ignore race and justify doing so by suggesting that race has nothing to do with the true underlying nature of society. Therefore, they present racism as a kind of random deviation from the norm of social equality, but not as an important social phenomenon in its own right. However, as Mills points out, a brief survey of modern human history shows that systematic racism has been the norm, not systematic equality. This racism is not random, either: it has almost always involved discrimination by white people, against non-white people, for the sake of material gain. Therefore, the racial contract theory is superior to the raceless social contract theory because it correctly views racial exploitation, domination, and discrimination as central to political history.

Mills points out that many philosophers consider ordinary social contract theories superior *because* they ignore real-life characteristics like race and therefore focus on abstract essences rather than messy real-world problems. In response, Mills argues that political philosophy's purpose is really to help people understand and improve the messy real world. The world is divided on the basis of race, so when philosophers think and write as if it doesn't exist, they prevent themselves (and their audience) from understanding or addressing racism. In contrast, the racial contract theory offers people of all races an opportunity to identify and take a moral stand against white supremacy.

Mills argues that the racial contract theory is also a more accurate description of what the classical social contract theorists believed than the raceless social contract. In other words, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant actually believed in white supremacy and wanted to construct a society around this principle. Mills shows how all four of these thinkers explicitly defend "equality among equals" but inequality among races. For instance, Immanuel Kant believed that people's membership in the social contract depends only on their rationality—but he also developed a racial hierarchy in which he explicitly argued that different racial groups had different levels of rationality, or "innate *talent*." He therefore concluded that non-white people (and women) were not rational enough to have full rights in society. By showing that classical social contract theories were really proposals for white supremacist racial contracts, Mills explains the apparent contradiction between European colonialism (which was based on subjugation and enslavement) and Enlightenment social contract theory (which proclaimed that all people were equal and deserved equal rights). However, the raceless social contract theory cannot explain this contradiction. Instead, contemporary philosophers erase the white supremacist elements of these classical philosophers' theories by wrongly treating them as race-neutral.

Finally, Mills argues that the racial contract theory also explains why contemporary mainstream social contract theorists fail to recognize or challenge white supremacy—which makes their work factually incorrect and politically useless. As an example, Mills points out that two of the most influential contemporary political philosophers, John Rawls and Robert Nozick, present extensive theories of society, justice, and equality without ever mentioning slavery or colonialism. Mills argues that philosophers like Rawls and Nozick theorize about "abstract and general categories that originally were restricted to white citizens." In other words, they settle abstract questions of how equal persons should be treated, but they don't address the way that different persons are viewed and treated as unequal in the first place. In Mills's view, this blind spot is only possible because the entire discipline operates in the implicitly white supremacist tradition that Kant, Rousseau, and the other classical theorists laid out. Therefore, other philosophers do not *expect* thinkers like Rawls and Nozick to mention history, slavery, and colonialism, because these aren't seen as significant enough to theorize about. Mills argues that this is partially because, in philosophy, a white male perspective is seen as neutral and objective. In fact, many white male philosophers struggle to understand any theory that's *not* written from that perspective, whereas non-white philosophers have to write from someone else's perspective in order to be taken seriously. For Mills, this explains Euro-American philosophy's remarkable lack of diversity and total inattention to non-European thinkers.

Since Mills argues that political philosophy has always been about describing society and prescribing changes for it, he concludes that it's essential to connect mainstream white social contract theory to the rich traditions of "Native American, African American, and Third and Fourth World political thought." Specifically, he views his own work as part of the tradition of oppositional Black political thought. He hopes that the racial contract theory will help make these connections, in addition helping his readers root out the white supremacist assumptions that led earlier thinkers awry and ultimately change the world.



COGNITIVE DISTORTION AND WHITE IGNORANCE

In *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills argues that white supremacy isn't just a profoundly unequal political order: it's also a way of thinking and perceiving the world. Specifically, the racial contract racializes the world, meaning that it imposes race on people, places and things. It also fosters an "epistemology of *ignorance*," or a set of distorted patterns of thinking and perception that make white supremacy invisible to the very people who benefit from it—white people themselves. According to Mill, these cognitive distortions serve to justify, protect, and stifle resistance to the

racial contract, all while protecting white people's disproportionate wealth, power, and political rights under it.

First, the racial contract racializes the world—that is, it imposes race onto people, places, and things—in order to justify white domination over non-white people. Most importantly, the racial contract racializes individuals, defining them in terms of racial categories. Essentially, this means that white people divide the human population into white/non-white, or human/subhuman, so that they can distribute rights and liberties to different groups in different ways. Mills gives the example of how European colonial societies invented racially specific justifications for expropriating Native people's land, enslaving Black people, and taking over existing societies in Africa and Asia through conquest. This shows how the racial contract allowed Europeans to project racial categories onto the rest of the world, depending on how it best served them. The racial contract also racializes spaces, meaning that it associates spaces with different racial groups. During the era of European conquest, for example, Europeans defined Europe as "*the global locus of [morality and] rationality*," while associating the rest of the world with vice, godlessness, and unreason. This allowed Europeans to portray colonization as a global process of Europe "civilizing" the world. Mills argues that this also happens today, and it also happens on smaller scales—for instance, through public rhetoric about majority-non-white urban neighborhoods in the U.S., which justifies gentrifying or divesting from those neighborhoods. Again, this shows that racializing space is an excuse for expropriating or dominating it.

In order to justify white people's disproportionate power and privilege, the racial contract blinds them to the truth about this power and privilege. In many instances, rather than seeing non-white people as complex individuals making rational decisions in imperfect circumstances, white people replace them with racist caricatures. Mills argues that many white people live in "a racial fantasyland" because they never actually interact with non-white people but learn stereotypes about them from popular culture. Accordingly, in place of the real non-European world, they imagine "countries that never were, inhabited by people who never were." Unsurprisingly, these stereotypes tend to be negative and emphasize non-white people's childishness, stupidity, or exoticism. These racist caricatures both prevent white people from empathizing with non-white people and justify their subjugation. Next, the racial contract creates a "*racialized moral psychology*" in which white people learn to see racist exploitation as the right thing to do. Mills calls this "*Herrenvolk [master-race] ethics*," because white people learn to apply one set of moral principles to one another and another set of moral principles to non-white people. (For instance, they might perceive enslaving people as doing them a favor.) As a result, when dealing with people of color, white people are sometimes literally unable to tell right from wrong, so they often perpetrate violence while believing themselves to

be doing good.

Most insidiously, Mills says, the racial contract encourages white people to strategically forget certain crucial elements of their own history. This allows them to avoid recognizing the historical reality of white supremacy or seeing how it has victimized other groups. Mills points out that, over the last 500 years, Europe and its offshoot countries (like the U.S. and Australia) has been responsible for the vast majority global of atrocities, genocides, and wars. He offers a long list of these abuses, ranging from the genocide of Native American peoples to slavery, lynching, and U.S. war crimes in Vietnam. And yet, with the notable exception of the Holocaust, Europeans and North Americans seldom learn about this history in school and don't have an open conversation about it in the public sphere. For instance, Hitler openly proclaimed that he was following the same steps as the English took in India and the Spanish did in the New World—but not only is this not common knowledge, it would likely seem egregious to many Europeans and Americans. For Mills, this shows that white people are collectively in denial about the past, and this collective denial prevents them from confronting the fact that their own wealth and privilege is based on genocide, slavery, and exploitation. In other words, this collective denial makes the racial contract invisible. It allows white citizens, scholars, and policymakers to sincerely believe that Europe is wealthy because of its geographical advantages or due to random chance—rather than seeing that this wealth is the direct result of centuries of subjugation.

While the racial contract often distorts its white benefactors' perceptions beyond recognition, its structure and effects are usually clear to the non-white people it exploits and devalues. White thinkers, citizens, and politicians talk about extending universal rights and liberties to all people, all while imposing racial categories on humanity and then ensuring that those rights and liberties are only fully extended to white people. But Black, Indigenous, and Third World thinkers throughout history have clearly recognized that European and European-founded states were based on a two-tier system of rights and privileges. Meanwhile, esteemed white intellectuals often deny that white supremacy exists, even while they're staring it in the face. That said, Mills by no means thinks that white people *can't* understand how white supremacy works—after all, his book is an attempt to explain white supremacy to people of all races. Rather, his point is that the racial contract systematically distorts the white public's thinking so that they don't have to confront the uncomfortable contradiction between their stated values and the actual power structures that benefit them.



RACISM'S HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

In *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills doesn't just condemn European colonialism, imperialism, and slavery in the past: he also argues that the racial

contract persists today. While contemporary nation-states no longer formally write racial hierarchies into their laws and constitutions, Mills explains, they still impose these hierarchies through other, less obvious, but equally powerful means. This is because the racial contract has evolved: non-white people have convinced the white public to reject open discrimination, so the white public has created a system of informal discrimination instead. This illustrates the racial contract's adaptiveness in the long term. Indeed, Mills emphasizes that "the Racial Contract is *continually being rewritten*," which means that whenever it's challenged, it adapts over time to reassert its dominance and hide its workings.

In the 20th century, the racial contract replaced explicit racial hierarchy with an informal one, which allows it to sustain white supremacy today, when even most white people no longer accept explicit hierarchies. Mills divides the history of the racial contract into three periods: the time before white supremacy; the long epoch of "formal, juridical white supremacy" from roughly the 1500s to the mid-1900s; and the current period, which he calls "*de facto* white supremacy," or white supremacy in practice but not in law. In this current period, the racial contract functions by legally granting non-white people equal rights but depriving them of these rights through different, nominally race-blind procedures. Therefore, formal (or *de jure*) discrimination in the past has been replaced with informal (or *de facto*) discrimination in the present. For instance, Mills points out that racial discrimination in hiring is no longer legal in the U.S., but organizations—including city governments—have developed informal procedures to label and reject Black candidates' applications. Similarly, housing discrimination is still rampant, and most poor non-white neighborhoods in the U.S. remain highly segregated. With these examples, Mill shows that it's possible to maintain white supremacy through the law (or at least in compliance with it) even when the law legally claims to uphold equality for all people. However, Mills admits that many people—especially white people who benefit from the racial contract—believe that racism no longer exists because discrimination is no longer *de jure* (formal). This shows that, by switching from formal to informal discrimination, the racial contract has sustained white supremacy *and* convinced white people that white supremacy no longer exists. In turn, this illustrates how the racial contract's adaptability is one of the reasons it's so powerful and difficult to dismantle.

Similarly, depending on the sources of intellectual authority in any given place and time, the racial contract can adapt the language it uses to justify discrimination. This leads many of its white benefactors to misperceive exploitation as justice. For instance, Mills points out that Europeans initially used religious language to justify their rule over non-Europeans—the Spanish colonized the New World with explicit approval from the Pope and argued that Native Americans had no natural rights because they were not Christians. Gradually, as reason and

democracy gained power over religion and the Church, this gave way to secular language. For instance, Kant argued that humans' inherent value depended on their rationality (which he argued that non-white people lacked). By couching itself in the dominant concepts of each time period, the racial contract presented itself as the natural order of things and won validity in its white beneficiaries' eyes. This process repeated itself a century later, when Darwin's evolutionary theories became popular and biology gained authority in European public life. This led to European scientists measuring people's skulls and IQs in an attempt to prove that white people were superior to non-white people. While scientifically invalid, their experiments gave white supremacy a veneer of scientific authority. Again, this shows how the racial contract consolidates its power by adapting to broader intellectual trends.

Finally, racial categories can change over time, which makes the racial contract more resilient and adaptable. Mills points out that the category of whiteness generally expands over time. Whenever they face a threat to their power, white people (the racial contract's beneficiaries) can grow stronger by simply accepting new people into the club of whiteness. This is why white people once discriminated against "the Irish, Slavs, Mediterraneans, and above all, of course, Jews," but now these groups are largely considered white (at least in North America). Of course, the category of whiteness has also shrunk at times—most notably with the Nazis, who considered themselves the best of all white people. Essentially, the Nazis kicked other groups out of their definition of whiteness, and then applied the basic logic of the racial contract to them, treating them as subhumans with no rights because of their perceived inferiority. This shows how selectively restricting racial categories can also increase a group's power. For Mills, the racial contract is constantly transforming: its methods, its justifications, and even its underlying racial categories change depending on what is most effective at maintaining the existing structure of power. In turn, the common belief that white supremacy no longer exists actually just proves how effectively white supremacy has adapted to new social contexts. The racial contract is still in effect, just in a changed form. If the racial contract's critics truly want to dismantle it and create a just and equitable society, Mills suggests that they have to adapt along with it by identifying and confronting its new forms, structures, and justifications.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.





THE SAVAGE

The concept of the non-white "savage" symbolizes

how white people have historically justified white supremacy by imagining an inherent division between white and non-white people. In European and North American popular culture, literature, and philosophy, the portrayal of non-white people as “savages” is a common racist trope—and Mills argues that viewing non-white people in this way is really just a thinly-veiled justification for colonization, expropriation, and slavery. This is because it suggests that non-white people are culturally, morally, and intellectually inferior to white people. In turn, this implies that non-white people need to be reformed, particularly through contact with (or domination by) white people and cultures.

The term “savage” originates in the Latin *homo sylvestris*, which essentially means “wild man of the wood.” In Europe, this word became a way to associate non-white people with wild, untamed, exotic, and dangerous spaces. By extension, just as Europeans considered it their mission to tame wild spaces, they made it their mission to tame—or colonize—“savage” populations. In reality, framing non-white people in this way was an excuse for Europeans to colonize their lands and enslave them. And in this way, the stereotype of the “savage” represents the way white supremacy has been normalized throughout history.

Enlightenment philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau also used the concept of savagery to place limits on who deserves freedom and equality. Because they tied the difference between human beings and savages to certain characteristics that they deemed necessary for civil society—like the capacity for morality and rational thought—they used the idea of savagery to justify denying political rights and freedoms to non-white people. Unfortunately, Mills argues, the racist trope of savagery is still alive and well today: many white people continue to live in a “racial fantasyland,” seeing non-white people as animalistic savages rather than complex human beings. For Mills, then, the “savage” still symbolizes the way that non-white people are treated as subhuman under white supremacy.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Mills uses this folk saying as the epigraph to *The Racial Contract* because it represents his book’s central argument: white citizens, philosophers, and leaders often talk about “justice” for all, but they end up hoarding wealth, resources, and opportunities for themselves (“Just us”). Not only do their words contradict their actions: these words actually serve as cover for those actions. By talking about justice, white people portray the exploitation of non-white people as something noble. The white establishment uses this story to deflect any criticism for its true actions—and as a result, many white citizens genuinely believe in the story, so they fail to recognize that their nations are rich because of exploitation.

This aphorism also neatly summarizes Mills’s critique of mainstream white philosophy, which he thinks also confuses “justice” with “just us.” Namely, although white social and moral philosophers dedicate their careers to discussing concepts like equality, justice, and human rights, they tend to do so in an entirely abstract way. Oftentimes, the most important examples of actual injustice in recent human history—genocide, colonialism, slavery, and racial discrimination—aren’t considered. Most tellingly, the Enlightenment philosophers who are generally credited with developing the social contract theory believed that the benefits of civilized society should be reserved for white people, and that non-white people were inherently inferior and therefore incapable of participating in society. In both classical and contemporary philosophy, then, white thinkers tend to talk about lofty universal goals like justice but have little interest in actually achieving them, because this requires recognizing non-white people as legitimate and important.

Finally, Mills’s decision to use a folk aphorism as an epigraph also reflects his belief that marginalized people tend to have a unique insight into the power structure of the society that marginalizes them. In contrast, he argues, privilege often distorts people’s thinking and prevents them from clearly understanding the very social systems that privilege them.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cornell University Press edition of *The Racial Contract* published in 1999.

Introduction Quotes

●● When white people say “Justice,” they mean “Just us.”
—Black American folk aphorism.

●● White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes: **Page Number:** 1**Explanation and Analysis**

In the first sentence of *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills introduces the book's main goal: to explain white supremacy, both by accounting for its formation through the theory of the racial contract and by describing how it operates in the modern world. By white supremacy, Mills doesn't mean a mere belief in white people's superiority, but rather a political system run by and for white people, at the expense of non-white people. While belief in white superiority aim to justify this system, they aren't its primary cause or driving force.

Mills argues that white supremacy is "unnamed" and global because, although it has been the primary system for distributing wealth and power over the last 500 years, few people in the contemporary world are willing to openly say as much. This is why Mills chose to write *The Racial Contract*: he believes that accurately understanding and meaningfully changing society requires clearly identifying that the global distribution of resources is deliberately skewed toward white people. This imbalance was originally established during the long era of European colonialism, when European powers seized land elsewhere in the world, stole non-European people's natural resources, and enslaved non-European people. All of the profit from this activity went to Europe, and this explains why Europe and its offshoot countries (like the U.S. and Australia) remain rich today.

This is why Mills believes that white supremacy "has made the modern world what it is today." Power and wealth make it easy to accumulate even more power and wealth, so white countries continue to exploit their financial advantages to pull even further ahead. The result is that a small minority of the world's population controls the majority of global wealth, power, and cultural influence. This is the "unnamed political system" that Mills believes ought to be overcome.

●● The "Racial Contract," then, is intended as a conceptual bridge between two areas now largely segregated from each other: on the one hand, the world of mainstream (i.e., white) ethics and political philosophy, preoccupied with discussions of justice and rights in the abstract, on the other hand, the world of Native American, African American, and Third and Fourth World political thought, historically focused on issues of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, white settlement, land rights, race and racism, slavery, jim crow, reparations, apartheid, cultural authenticity, national identity, indigenismo, Afrocentrism, etc. These issues hardly appear in mainstream political philosophy, but they have been central to the political struggles of the majority of the world's population. Their absence from what is considered serious philosophy is a reflection not of their lack of seriousness but of the color of the vast majority of Western academic philosophers (and perhaps their lack of seriousness).

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 4**Explanation and Analysis**



Mills explains that his theory of the racial contract combines key elements of both white Euro-American philosophy and theory that's grounded in the lived experiences of non-white people around the world. Therefore, although Mills is critiquing mainstream white philosophy, he still uses its methods and takes its concerns seriously. This is because he isn't trying to tear down conventional philosophy: he's trying to fix it by connecting its abstract discussions of politics and morality to the concrete political and moral issues of our time. In particular, he wants to apply a serious reckoning with racism and white supremacy to the social contract theory (the idea that people voluntarily form societies to protect their rights).

First, Mills hopes that this reckoning will help fix philosophy itself, which he argues is increasingly distant from the real world and increasingly blind to people's actual experiences. Since social philosophy's purpose is to help people understand and change the world, its growing irrelevance is a serious problem. And second, Mills hopes to vindicate non-white theorists' work by showing that it is just as legitimate and important as that of white philosophers.

Chapter 1, Part 1 Quotes

☛ The Racial Contract is that set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements [...] between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) “racial” (phenotypical/genealogical/cultural) criteria C1, C2, C3 ... as “white,” and coextensive (making due allowance for gender differentiation) with the class of full persons, to categorize the remaining subset of humans as “nonwhite” and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities [...] the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some whites are not *signatories* to it.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This is Mills’s definition of the racial contract, the book’s titular and central philosophical concept. First, Mills argues that the racial contract can be “formal or informal,” which means that it can include formal legal agreements as well as unwritten decisions about how to treat non-white people. This means that racist laws (like the U.S.’s former Three-fifths Compromise, which legally defined non-white slaves as three-fifths of an individual) *and* informal racist agreements (a real estate agent refusing to show houses to Black buyers, for instance) are both part of the racial contract.

In addition to normal “agreements,” the racial contract can also include “meta-agreements” about the way that other agreements are applied. For instance, a white supremacist state could make an *agreement* to enslave non-white people, or it could make a *meta-agreement* that normal political freedoms do not apply to non-white people. This meta-agreement feature is what allows the racial contract to undermine the social contract (the theory that people voluntarily join societies as a means of self-preservation).

Next, the racial contract is not only the way white people subjugate non-white people: it’s also the way they define themselves as white (and define non-white people as non-white). This is why they use “(shifting) “racial” (phenotypical/genealogical/cultural) criteria” to define themselves as the privileged in-group. These criteria change over time,

depending on the social conditions—it can be advantageous for white people to admit other ethnicities into the privileged class in different times and places.


Most importantly, the division between white and non-white people turns into a division between “persons” and “subpersons,” or a division based on people’s *moral status*. This idea of moral difference becomes a justification for “differential privileging,” or white people applying a different set of laws and rules to themselves than they do to non-white people. The purpose of this hierarchy of privilege is “the exploitation of [nonwhite people’s] bodies, land, and resources” for white people’s economic and political gain.

Finally, Mills says that “all whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some whites are not *signatories* to it.” What he means is that all white people benefit from being part of a privileged class, even though some white people do not necessarily consent to the racial contract. While it’s true that not all white people actively play a part in forming the racial contract, what Mills means here is that not all white people actively *perpetuate* the contract. Many white people choose to put humanity’s interests above their own, so they join the fight for racial justice. However, this does not make their privilege disappear, so they are still “*beneficiaries* of the Contract” in Mills’s view.

☛ The requirements of “objective” cognition, factual and moral, in a racial polity are in a sense more demanding in that officially sanctioned reality is divergent from actual reality. So here, it could be said, one has an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular.

Thus in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. [...] To a significant extent, then, white signatories will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17-8

Explanation and Analysis

Mills divides the racial contract into three primary parts: political, moral, and epistemological. This last piece, the epistemological contract, concerns the way that people know and perceive the world. Namely, Mills argues that people agree to choose a perspective as a “a correct, objective interpretation of the world” and base their views of other people on their willingness to recognize this single version of the truth.



In Mills’s view, the racial contract’s epistemology is “an epistemology of ignorance,” because it requires white people to wrongly believe that the world is just. In other words, white people have created a divided global system through colonialism, slavery, expropriation, and segregation, but they choose not to see it because the system benefits them. This is a version of blaming the victim: rather than confronting the uncomfortable truth that Europe and North America are rich because they have plundered the rest of the world, white Europeans and North Americans prefer to believe that the rest of the world is poor because its people, culture, and geography are somehow inferior.

For white people, the choice is generally easy—it’s far more comfortable and advantageous to choose the “racial fantasyland” over reality. But for people of color, gaining recognition in the white supremacist state requires denying their own history and playing into white supremacy.

Chapter 1, Part 2 Quotes

●● Although no single act literally corresponds to the drawing up and signing of a contract, there is a series of acts—papal bulls and other theological pronouncements; European discussions about colonialism, “discovery,” and international law; pacts, treaties, and legal decisions; academic and popular debates about the humanity of nonwhites; the establishment of formalized legal structures of differential treatment; and the routinization of informal illegal or quasi-legal practices effectively sanctioned by the complicity of silence and government failure to intervene and punish perpetrators—which collectively can be seen, not just metaphorically but close to literally, as its conceptual, juridical, and normative equivalent.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20-1

Explanation and Analysis

After briefly explaining what the racial contract says and does, Mills turns to what the racial contract *is*. Unlike the founding of a nation through a constitution, white supremacist society is not founded based on a single document called “the racial contract.” Rather, this contract is made of “a series of acts” whose cumulative effect is to establish white supremacy. This is similar to the way that “the law” is not just a one-time document, or even a limited number of documents established over time, but rather a constantly changing body of ideas, interpretations, legal rulings, and moral principles used to govern society.

When Mills says that the social contract comes from “a series of acts” that create a distinction between white and non-white human life, however, he is not saying this “metaphorically but close to literally.” This separates it from the social contract, which (at least today) is essentially considered a *metaphor* for how societies form. Mills isn’t saying that we can view society as though it were hypothetically founded on white people’s agreement to maintain white supremacy: rather, he’s saying that maintaining white supremacy was the explicit purpose and historical effect of modern societies.

●● It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization...The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity.

Related Characters: Jules Harmand (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In the early 20th century, this was the French theorist Jules Harmand’s defense of white supremacy. He clearly states that colonialism’s central “principle and point of departure” was the superiority of the white race, and that colonialism’s white leaders believed that their racial superiority gave them a right to conquer the rest of the world and “direct the rest of humanity.” Of course, this was largely an excuse to exploit non-white people’s resources and labor, rather than reflecting a genuine desire to help them.

Today, there are many retroactive explanations for colonialism that miss this basic point: colonialism was an explicitly white supremacist political system. Such explanations tend to be ahistorical justifications and excuses. Mills explains that the fact of the matter is that an explicit belief in white racial superiority was the norm until less than a century ago—this was Europeans' primary justification for colonizing and enslaving other peoples for centuries. In fact, it was even common sense among scholars and philosophers like Harmand. Mills presents this quote in order to argue that philosophy has failed to come to terms with its white supremacist past—but the reason for this isn't that philosophers can't tell that their predecessors were racist. Rather, in Mills's view, it's because philosophers are willfully ignorant and want to distance themselves from those (like Harmand) who openly admitted white supremacist beliefs.

It would be a fundamental error, then—a point to which I will return—to see racism as anomalous, a mysterious deviation from European Enlightenment humanism. Rather, it needs to be realized that, in keeping with the Roman precedent, *European humanism usually meant that only Europeans were human*. European moral and political theory, like European thought in general, developed within the framework of the Racial Contract and, as a rule, took it for granted.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker), Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Immanuel Kant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26-7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mills distinguishes his analysis of Enlightenment social philosophers—like Kant, Rousseau, and Locke—from the stories that most modern-day educated people are likely to have heard about them. According to common knowledge, these philosophers sincerely believed in freedom, justice, and equality for all. Society has lagged behind their ideals but has moved toward them nonetheless, and it might eventually catch up. Under this worldview, people must “see racism as anomalous, a mysterious deviation from European Enlightenment humanism.” But in reality, Mills argues, the Enlightenment (a 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement that centered on reason and liberal ideals) was deeply racist. Most Enlightenment philosophers believed

that white people were morally, culturally, and biologically superior to non-white people.

Mills responds to the understandable assumption that, even if some Enlightenment philosophers were racist, this was an exception to the norm. According to this line of thought, these philosophers just didn't think seriously enough about race and followed the currents of their times. But Mills argues that, on the contrary, Enlightenment philosophers knew exactly what they were doing: many of them spent huge portions of their careers thinking about the moral status of non-white people, and after years of analysis and contemplation, they concluded that non-white people were not human beings and did not deserve human rights. Therefore, in Mills's view, it is also wrong to say that Enlightenment philosophers were just incidentally or unknowingly racist, as their racism was a central part of their theory.

Yet the United States itself, of course, is a white settler state on territory expropriated from its aboriginal inhabitants through a combination of military force, disease, and a “century of dishonor” of broken treaties. The expropriation involved literal genocide (a word now unfortunately devalued by hyperbolic overuse) of a kind that some recent revisionist historians have argued needs to be seen as comparable to the Third Reich's. Washington, Father of the Nation, was, understandably, known somewhat differently to the Senecas as “Town Destroyer.” In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson characterized Native Americans as “merciless Indian Savages,” and in the Constitution, blacks, of course, appear only obliquely, through the famous “60 percent solution.” Thus, as Richard Drinnon concludes: “The Framers manifestly established a government under which non-Europeans were not men created equal—in the white polity...they were nonpeoples.”

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis



Enlightenment philosophers are commonly believed to have laid out a set of lofty moral ideals, which the rest of society has strived to achieve over the last few centuries. Similarly, the aristocrats who founded the U.S. are often portrayed as

providing their nation with this kind of moral guidance. According to this narrative, these founders envisioned creating a free and equal society where anyone could do whatever they dreamed. While U.S. history has not totally fulfilled the promise of freedom and equality, this story continues: people generally believe that Enlightenment principles (like individual liberty and constitutional government) have been successful in the West and have only deviated in some occasional ways.

But Mills argues that, in reality, the U.S. is a white supremacist society founded on genocide and the theft of native land. This is a historical reality, and it was also the founders' original intent. The common story of exceptionalism, freedom, and equality is simply a lie told to convince Americans—especially white Americans who benefit from the racial contract—that their nation is morally heroic and just. In reality, the U.S. has amassed incredible wealth and power through slavery and other forms of violence. For Mills, the wide gap between historical reality and American fantasy speak to white supremacy's power to foster ignorance.

☛ We live, then, in a world built on the Racial Contract. That we do is simultaneously quite obvious if you think about it [...] and nonobvious, since most whites *don't* think about it or don't think about it as the outcome of a history of political oppression but rather as just "the way things are." [...] In the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) which divided the world between Spain and Portugal, the Valladolid (Spain) Conference (1550–1551) to decide whether Native Americans were really human, the later debates over African slavery and abolitionism, the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) to partition Africa, the various inter-European pacts, treaties, and informal arrangements on policing their colonies, the post-World War I discussions in Versailles after a war to make the world safe for democracy—we see (or should see) with complete clarity a world being governed by white people.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mills summarizes the central argument of this section of his book: the racial contract is not only a historical fact, but it's "obvious" to anyone who objectively looks at the last 500 years of world history. If people think about European colonialism the same way they would other

conquering nations, they could understand "with complete clarity."

The problem, in Mills's view, is that people tend to learn history through the lens of national myths—which means that Europeans and Americans learn that European domination is synonymous with justice, freedom, and moral right. As a result, Mills points out, the racial contract is both "quite obvious" to people who know their history "and nonobvious" to most white people, who generally learn a highly distorted version of history and don't think twice about the order of the world.

As a result, people of color are stuck between a rock and a hard place. They can often see the obvious contradictions between myth and reality in a way that most white people can't, but they know that white people will remain ignorant or choose denial over the truth.

Chapter 1, Part 3 Quotes

☛ Economic structures have been set in place, causal processes established, whose outcome is to pump wealth from one side of the globe to another, and which will continue to work largely independently of the ill will/good will, racist/antiracist feelings of particular individuals. This globally color-coded distribution of wealth and poverty has been produced by the Racial Contract and in turn reinforces adherence to it in its signatories and beneficiaries.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36–7

Explanation and Analysis

According to Mills, white supremacy wasn't just the dominant global political system in the past: it still is today. This might be difficult to swallow for some readers, who may assume that the era of colonialism and white supremacy has passed. But Mills insists that, by actually looking at the modern-day political and economic order, it's easy to see that the "globally color-coded distribution of wealth and poverty" is more unequal than ever.



After white people and countries amassed disproportionate wealth and power during the peak of colonialism, they created economic and political institutions that have maintained and amplified that power ever since. This is the case even though most former colonies are technically independent, and explicit white supremacy is technically taboo in most of the contemporary world. Specifically, the

countries outside of Europe and North America provide material resources and cheap labor that primarily benefits Europe and North America. Just like during colonialism, the profits from most industry in the Global South go primarily to large corporations based in wealthy, majority-white countries. This is why Mills argues that “the racial contract is an exploitation contract”—its primary function is creating and maintaining economic privilege for a global elite that *became* elite through colonialism.

Chapter 2, Part 1 Quotes

It is not merely that space is normatively characterized on the macrolevel before conquest and colonial settlement, but that even afterward, on the local level, there are divisions, the European city and the Native Quarter, Whitetown and Niggertown/Darktown, suburb and inner city. David Theo Goldberg comments, “Power in the polis, and this is especially true of racialized power, reflects and refines the spatial relations of its inhabitants.” Part of the purpose of the color bar/the color line/apartheid/jim crow is to maintain these spaces in their place, to have the checkerboard of virtue and vice, light and dark space, ours and theirs, clearly demarcated so that the human geography prescribed by the Racial Contract can be preserved.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47-8

Explanation and Analysis


Mills argues that one way the racial contract shapes the world is by “racing” physical spaces, or associating different spaces with specific racial groups. Both during colonialism and in the present day, different places—whether continents, nations, neighborhoods, schools, apartments, or even sections of the same room—are placed into a hierarchy based on which ones are associated with white people and which ones are associated with people of color. One clear example of this division is the way colonialism divides the world, and so is the contemporary geography of cities in settler nations like the U.S. and South Africa.

This is why segregation is so effective at maintaining the racial contract: by physically separating people, it prevents them from interacting and reinforces the divisions between them. Segregation makes it possible for white people to continue associating Black neighborhoods with danger, evil, and illegality—and this ends up affecting their view of Black

people themselves, too.

The basic sequence ran something like this: there are no people there in the first place; in the second place, they’re not improving the land; and in the third place—oops!—they’re already all dead anyway (and, honestly, there really weren’t that many to begin with), so there are no people there, as we said in the first place.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis



By associating different places with different groups of people, the racial contract justified Europe’s conquest of the rest of the world. Through the myths of settlement spreading to empty lands, civilization eradicating barbarism, and lightness encroaching on darkness, white supremacist states excused the moral atrocity of killing and enslaving people and conquering other countries.

Through his sarcastic assessment of this process, Mills implies that Europeans used a series of thinly-veiled excuses to trick themselves into thinking that they were doing something good (or at least reasonable). Accordingly, they managed to enslave and conquer other countries without ever really admitting what they were doing. The “cognitive distortions” that Mills talks about in the rest of the book are an extension of this same process: they allow people to avoid confronting the moral horror of the actions that white people have committed in the past. And, as a result, this perpetuates the message that white people’s disproportionate power, wealth, and privilege are justifiable.

Chapter 2, Part 2 Quotes

☛☛ The hierarchically differentiated human values of plebeian and patrician, of serf, monk, and knight, were replaced by the “infinite value” of all human beings. It is a noble and inspiring ideal, even if its incorporation into countless manifestos, declarations, constitutions, and introductory ethics texts has now reduced it to a homily, deprived it of the shattering political force it once had. But what needs to be emphasized is that it is only white persons (and really only white males) who have been able to take this for granted, for whom it can be an unexciting truism. As Lucius Outlaw underlines, European liberalism restricts “egalitarianism to equality among equals,” and blacks and others are ontologically excluded by race from the promise of “the liberal project of modernity.” The terms of the Racial Contract mean that nonwhite subpersonhood is enshrined simultaneously with white personhood.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55-6

Explanation and Analysis


The Enlightenment (a 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement) promoted the ideal of all people’s “infinite value” at the same time as the racial contract began explicitly discounting non-white people’s humanity. In reality, Mills argues, these two ideas work together because white men decided that only they truly counted as “people” with “infinite value.” As a result, they believed in the lofty ideal of “infinite value” while simultaneously believing in white supremacy.


This process illustrates how the idea of an essential difference between white and non-white people is the cornerstone of the racial contract. This idea is what allows a racially divided society to form, in which certain people count as fully human and others as inferior subhumans. It also encourages white men to explain away their own privilege as something natural and expected, in the sense that it gives them a convenient explanation for oppressing inferior groups. As a result, the whole process goes like this: white people subjugate non-white people, then decide that non-white people are inferior, and finally blame non-white people’s inferiority for their subjugation.

Chapter 2, Part 3 Quotes

☛☛ The golden age of contract theory (1650 to 1800) overlapped with the growth of a European capitalism whose development was stimulated by the voyages of exploration that increasingly gave the contract a *racial* subtext. The evolution of the modern version of the contract, characterized by an antipatriarchalist Enlightenment liberalism, with its proclamations of the equal rights, autonomy, and freedom of all men, thus took place simultaneously with the massacre, expropriation, and subjection to hereditary slavery of men at least apparently human. This contradiction needs to be reconciled; it is reconciled through the Racial Contract, which essentially denies their personhood and restricts the terms of the social contract to whites. “To invade and dispossess the people of an unoffending civilized country would violate morality and transgress the principles of international law,” writes Jennings, “but savages were exceptional. Being uncivilized by definition, they were outside the sanctions of both morality and law.” The *Racial Contract* is thus the truth of the *social contract*.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63-4

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Mills presents one of his central arguments about the relationship between the racial contract and the social contract. He notes that there’s an extreme contradiction between the proclaimed values of the European Enlightenment (a 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement), including the social contract theory, and Europeans’ historical actions in the same time period. As he has already pointed out, the racial contract resolves this contradiction by “[denying nonwhite people’s] personhood and restrict[ing] the terms of the social contract to whites.” It put “savages [...] outside the sanctions of both morality and law,” which allowed Europeans to continue claiming equality for all *people* (meaning white men) at the same time as they were conquering and civilizing non-white people whom they stereotyped as lawless savages.

Therefore, Mills concludes that “the *Racial Contract* is thus the truth of the *social contract*.” He means that, while European conquerors, explorers, and statesmen told themselves that they were enforcing the social contract and

building a free and equal society based on the citizenry's consent, in reality, they were enforcing the racial contract, or creating a society governed by and for white people, in which the non-white majority was effectively treated as an inhuman underclass. By extension, it would be reasonable to say that many white people's blindness to white supremacy is a result of their inability to distinguish the social contract from the racial contract, due to an ingrained assumption that non-white people are exceptions to the rule of human equality.

☛ The Racial Contract, therefore, underwrites the social contract, is a visible or hidden operator that restricts and modifies the scope of its prescriptions. But since there is both synchronic and diachronic variation, there are many different versions or local instantiations of the Racial Contract, and they evolve over time, so that the effective force of the social contract itself changes, and the kind of cognitive dissonance between the two alters.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis



Mills has already established that the racial and social contracts coincide, in the sense that what Europeans imagined to be the social contract was actually the racial contract. Here, he gives a more general explanation of the relationship between the two contracts: the social contract is an ideal vision of society, whereas the racial contract determines to what extent that social contract will be enforced (depending on social, economic, and political conditions). Alternatively, the racial contract can be thought of as the historical truth of the social contract, which is merely a theoretical ideal.

Whereas the ideal of the social contract does not change from time to time or place to place, the racial contract does. This determines whom society considers human and subhuman, white and non-white, or citizen and alien throughout history. The racial contract is therefore able to adapt over time, by variously expanding or restricting the scope of the social contract. For instance, during a time of political turmoil when white supremacy's power over the state is threatened, the racial contract might expand to include certain groups who weren't previously considered white (like Jewish people or people from the

Mediterranean). But at other times, certain groups of white people might try to restrict the category of whiteness, which explains phenomena like anti-Semitism.

☛ Contemporary debates between nonwhites and whites about the centrality or peripherality of race can thus be seen as attempts respectively to point out, and deny, the existence of the Racial Contract that underpins the social contract. The frustrating problem nonwhites have always had, and continue to have, with mainstream political theory is not with abstraction itself (after all, the "Racial Contract" is itself an abstraction) but with an idealizing abstraction that abstracts away from the crucial realities of the racial polity. The shift to the hypothetical, ideal contract encourages and facilitates this abstraction, since the eminently nonideal features of the real world are not part of the apparatus. There is then, in a sense, no conceptual point-of-entry to start talking about the fundamental way in which (as all nonwhites know) race structures one's life and affects one's life chances.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Mills points out the paradox that non-white people are constantly thinking about race, while white people tend not to think about it. This is because the racial contract never questions most white people's humanity or right to belong to civilized society. As a result, they pay little attention to the real problem of *who* has rights and instead assume that, as the theoretical ideal prescribes, *they* should always have rights. Since they're seldom forced to see that their society systematically denies these rights to people of color, they often become confused or incredulous when people of color report facing racial discrimination in their everyday lives. In other words, non-white people are well aware of the racial contract that underpins society, while many white people deny that it exists.

From a philosophical perspective, Mills identifies the social contract's abstraction as its central problem. To a certain degree, social philosophy must abstract away from real experience and focus on ideals, if it wants to adequately describe and propose fixes for society. However, the *kinds* of abstractions that it uses matter. For Mills, abstracting away from racism is not useful when racism is one of society's greatest contemporary obstacles. This would be like asking a philosopher what to do about the war and

hearing back that, in an ideal world, there would be no war. This is true, but it's also useless, because it creates "no conceptual point-of-entry to start talking about" the war. Therefore, Mills proposes the racial contract as a correction to the social contract precisely because its abstract concepts are specifically designed to address white supremacy.

Chapter 2, Part 4 Quotes

☞ Thus in the North and South American reactions to Native American resistance and slave uprisings, in the European responses to the Saint Domingue (Haitian) revolution, the Sepoy uprising ("Indian Mutiny"), the Jamaican Morant Bay insurrection, the Boxer rebellion in China, the struggle of the Hereros in German Africa, in the twentieth century colonial and neocolonial wars (Ethiopia, Madagascar, Vietnam, Algeria, Malaya, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia), in the white settlers' battles to maintain a white Rhodesia and an apartheid South Africa, one repeatedly sees the same pattern of systematic massacre. It is a pattern that confirms that an *ontological shudder* has been sent through the system of the white polity, calling forth what could be called *the white terror* to make sure that the foundations of the moral and political universe stay in place. [...] In general, then, watchfulness for nonwhite resistance and a corresponding readiness to employ massively disproportionate retaliatory violence are intrinsic to the fabric of the racial polity in a way different from the response to the typical crimes of white citizens.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 85-6

Explanation and Analysis

Although the racial contract's main purpose is economic exploitation, Mills argues that it inflicts disproportionate violence on non-white people as well, because this is the only way to maintain an unjust and exploitative social hierarchy. In his view, this is what makes colonialism truly horrific and morally indefensible.


While conventional narratives about history and colonialism tend to overlook many of the examples that Mills gives here, looking directly at history makes it clear that a "pattern of systematic massacre" has always sustained racially exploitative societies by terrorizing the non-white population. These massacres are often white people's response to *their own* terror at the possibility that non-

white people might violate the social order that oppresses them. To manage their fear of white supremacy collapsing, Mills suggests that white elites create a dual legal system, in which crimes by non-white people and against white people are punished far more severely.

Chapter 3, Part 1 Quotes

☞ My suggestion is that by looking at the *actual* historically dominant moral/political consciousness and the *actual* historically dominant moral/political ideals, we are better enabled to prescribe for society than by starting from ahistorical abstractions. In other words, the point is not to endorse this deficient consciousness and these repugnant ideals but, by recognizing their past and current influence and power and identifying their sources, to correct for them. Realizing a better future requires not merely admitting the ugly truth of the past—and present—but understanding the ways in which these realities were made invisible, acceptable to the white population. We want to know—both to describe and to explain—the circumstances that actually blocked achievement of the ideal raceless ideals and promoted instead the naturalized nonideal racial ideals. We want to know what went wrong in the past, is going wrong now, and is likely to *continue* to go wrong in the future if we do not guard against it.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Mills again distinguishes his project in *The Racial Contract* from the ordinary social contract theory, because the social contract is a purely theoretical ideal, while Mills strives to create a "naturalized" theory of society that accurately represents history and inter-group relations. He notes that many mainstream philosophers might take issue with this, as moral and political philosophy's goal is to imagine ideals for society. Nevertheless, Mills responds that philosophy's responsibility doesn't stop there: its ideals have a specific purpose, which is to help people improve the world by building *better* societies.


Based on this assessment of philosophy's goals, Mills argues that his naturalized theory of society is preferable to the social contract's ideal theory. While the social contract depends on "ahistorical abstractions," the racial contract seeks to understand the "deficient consciousness and [...] repugnant ideals" on which actual societies are based. This

allows people to fix problematic social structures, distorted patterns of thought, and warped values.

In a nutshell, then, the social contract might accurately portray the ultimate goal of human society—a completely equal, fair, and consensual government by and for all the people. But through its focus on this perfect ideal, it actually prevents people from thinking and acting in the way that will best move society toward this idea. Needless to say, social progress requires paying attention to social hierarchies like race, as opposed to pretending they don't exist simply because they wouldn't in an ideal world.

☛ There is also the evidence of silence. Where is Grotius's magisterial *On Natural Law and the Wrongness of the Conquest of the Indies*, Locke's stirring *Letter concerning the Treatment of the Indians*, Kant's moving *On the Personhood of Negroes*, Mill's famous condemnatory *Implications of Utilitarianism for English Colonialism*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's outraged *Political Economy of Slavery*? Intellectuals write about what interests them, what they find important, and—especially if the writer is prolific—silence constitutes good prima facie evidence that the subject was not of particular interest. By their failure to denounce the great crimes inseparable from the European conquest, or by the halfheartedness of their condemnation, or by their actual endorsement of it in some cases, most of the leading European ethical theorists reveal their complicity in the Racial Contract.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker), Immanuel Kant, John Locke

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Mills assesses and ultimately dismisses a number of arguments that some philosophers use to excuse Enlightenment thinkers' problematic ideas about race. For instance, some assume that Enlightenment philosophers' views on the subject can't be known because they didn't write enough about non-white people. Others even say that Enlightenment philosophers would have obviously cared about contemporary ethical issues because of the moral principles they expounded in their work. And finally, others believe that Enlightenment thinkers' work has *nothing to do*

with race simply because they were discussing other issues and working out universal theories.

For Mills, all of these explanations are inadequate. Enlightenment philosophers *did* write about people of color—as savages and barbarians who needed to be conquered—and their views have had significant implications for people of color throughout history. Most importantly, as Mills concludes here, these philosophers had a chance to speak out against the European colonization and slavery of their time—and yet they chose to say nothing. (And many even participated directly in European conquest.) In Mills's view, it makes little sense to hold these philosophers' work on ethics and social theory to the highest standards yet give their belief in racial hierarchy a pass.

☛ Correspondingly, the Racial Contract also explains the actual astonishing historical record of European atrocity against nonwhites, which quantitatively and qualitatively, in numbers and horrific detail, cumulatively dwarfs all other kinds of ethnically/racially motivated massacres put together.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 98



Explanation and Analysis

This is Mills's introduction to a lengthy list of violence committed by European and North American nations. These range from the genocide of 100 million native people in the Americas and the enslavement of at least 30 million Africans to the indiscriminate slaughter of Sudanese soldiers by British troops and Vietnamese families by Americans. Although Mills admits that it would be impossible to compile a full list of these atrocities, his point is clear: white supremacy, as upheld by European and North American military conquest, is the most destructive political system in the history of humankind. It is clearly intertwined with other political systems (like capitalism and authoritarianism), and it proclaims benevolent intentions (like freedom and human rights)—but for Mills, it is one of the greatest identifiable moral evils in the world today. Later in the book, he'll argue that this means all people have a moral obligation to work toward ending the racial contract and building a racially equitable society instead.

There is a real choice for whites, though admittedly a difficult one. The rejection of the Racial Contract and the normed inequities of the white polity [require one] to speak out and struggle against the terms of the Contract. So in this case, moral/political judgments about one's "consent" to the legitimacy of the political system and conclusions about one's effectively having become a signatory to the "contract," are apropos—and so are judgments of one's culpability. By unquestioningly "going along with things," by accepting all the privileges of whiteness with concomitant complicity in the system of white supremacy, one can be said to have consented to Whiteness.

And in fact there have always been praiseworthy whites—anticolonialists, abolitionists, opponents of imperialism, civil rights activists, resisters of apartheid—who have recognized the existence and immorality of Whiteness as a political system, challenged its legitimacy, and insofar as possible, refused the Contract.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

As *The Racial Contract's* titular theory primarily focuses on white supremacy, Mills's readers might take this to mean that he hates white people, their cultures, or the places where they live. However, this doesn't accurately represent Mills's philosophical position. In this book, he's focused on history, political and economic power, and the biases of other philosophers. Unlike white supremacists, he does not believe in racial essences or inherent racial destinies. As he puts it, he's not against whiteness (or white people as a collective identity group), but he is against Whiteness with a capital "W" (or the political system of white supremacy, which hoards wealth and power for white people).

Thus, Mills doesn't believe that individual white people are personally responsible for the crimes that other white people have committed in the past. However, they *are* responsible for their choice to either benefit from white supremacy or take a stand against it. Because they are already born into a white supremacist world that favors them and redistributes non-white people's resources toward them, white people contribute to that system's strength just by "going along with things." In order to actually take a stand on behalf of humanity (and against Whiteness), white people must "recognize[] the existence and immorality of Whiteness as a political system, challenge[] its legitimacy, and insofar as possible, refuse[] the Contract." Mills hopes that his scholarly work on the

racial contract can help make this possible for white people interested in building a just and equitable future.

Chapter 3, Part 2 Quotes

If to white readers this intellectual world, only half a century distant, now seems like a universe of alien concepts, it is a tribute to the success of the rewritten Racial Contract in transforming the terms of public discourse so that white domination is now conceptually invisible. [...] That the revival of Anglo-American political philosophy takes place in *this* period, the present epoch of the de facto Racial Contract, partially explains its otherworldly race insensitivity. The history of imperialism, colonialism, and genocide, the reality of systemic racial exclusion, are obfuscated in seemingly abstract and general categories that originally were restricted to white citizens.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mills points out a connection between the refusal to talk about race in both mainstream white philosophy and mainstream white society. Namely, Mills argues, philosophers have absorbed society's race-blind ideology and therefore assume that they're not being racist simply because they're not taking race into account. This is particularly ironic given that these philosophers tend to believe that they're working on universal problems that cut across all segments of the human population, and therefore that they're immune to social and political influences.

In fact, to create this sense of universality, political philosophers ironically tend to eschew politics altogether. Mills points out that the 20th century was full of important political struggles, many of them around the global color line between wealthy white colonizer countries and poor nonwhite former colonies. However, political philosophers almost never discussed these political movements. Meanwhile, they choose concepts and categories that stem from a long history of colonization, enslavement, and genocide that white people have committed against non-white people. If the purpose of political philosophy is to understand and influence politics, then Mills believes that these philosophers were willfully shirking their main professional duty. Rather, they are upholding and justifying the political order that currently exists.

Chapter 3, Part 3 Quotes

☞ No one actually believes nowadays, of course, that people formally came out of the wilderness and signed a contract. But there is the impression that the modern European nation-states were not centrally affected by their imperial history and that societies such as the United States were founded on noble moral principles meant to include everyone, but unfortunately, there were some deviations. *The “Racial Contract” explodes this picture as mythical, identifying it as itself an artifact of the Racial Contract in the second, de facto phase of white supremacy.* Thus—in the standard array of metaphors of perceptual/conceptual revolution—it effects a gestalt shift, reversing figure and ground, switching paradigms, inverting “norm” and “deviation,” to emphasize that *nonwhite racial exclusion from personhood was the actual norm.*

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 122


Explanation and Analysis

In the last section of his book, Mills outlines the myriad reasons why he believes that the racial contract is a more useful explanation for the formation of contemporary states than the social contract. His theory’s main advantage is its historical accuracy: unlike conventional philosophies that focus on describing an ideal society and then assume that the real world will or must progress toward that ideal, Mills focuses on developing a theory of the real world’s problems so that people can determine how to fix it.

Specifically, Mills puts white supremacy, rather than progress toward Enlightenment values (like reason, liberty, and tolerance) at the center of his analysis. As he puts it here, he shows that exclusion was the norm, not the exception. In turn, this means that equality and inclusion have never been norms (although they remain important goals). This allows him to show that mainstream philosophers’ focus on an ideal society and assumption that society is progressing are *part of* this white supremacy. This is because, in the contemporary era of informal white supremacy, this perspective allows philosophers (and the people they influence) to pretend that the world is and race-neutral. But Mills argues that, in reality, the world is really structured by an imbalance between white and non-white people in terms of power, wealth, and resources.

☞ The recent advent of discussions of “multiculturalism” is welcome, but what needs to be appreciated is that these are issues of political power, not just mutual misconceptions resulting from the clash of cultures.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 124-5

Explanation and Analysis

In discussing the tendency for white political philosophers to discount non-white thinkers, Mills argues that existing calls for diversifying curricula are not enough. According to Mills, simply introducing non-white voices into a white-dominated field of study will do little to change academia’s fundamental power structure. In particular, these non-white thinkers end up seeming like curious exceptions to the rule of “universal” (meaning white) theory. For instance, a philosophy class that focuses on European philosophers but includes a few non-white philosophers might suggest that most important thought happened in Europe, but that a few non-Europeans also had worthwhile ideas on topics pertaining to their own cultural or ethnic groups. In reality, philosophy has existed all around the world for centuries, and the Eurocentric bias of modern philosophy departments is simply the result of colonialism and white supremacy.

Therefore, Mills believes that while diversity is an improvement over the mainstream, it doesn’t fundamentally challenge the structure of power in philosophy and academia. In many ways, multiculturalism’s has the same problem as *de facto* (informal) white supremacy: namely, it focuses on changing appearances instead of changing real social structures. This is why Mills concludes that philosophy should aim for equity instead of multiculturalism.

●● Ironic, cool, hip, above all *knowing*, the “Racial Contract” speaks from the perspective of the cognizers whose mere presence in the halls of white theory is a cognitive threat, because—in the inverted epistemic logic of the racial polity—the “ideal speech situation” requires our absence, since we are, literally, the men and women *who know too much*, who—in that wonderful American expression—*know where the bodies are buried* (after all, so many of them are our own). It does what black critique has always had to do to be effective: it situates itself in the same space as its adversary and then shows what follows from “writing ‘race’ and [seeing] the difference it makes.” As such, it makes it possible for us to connect the two rather than, as at present, have them isolated in two ghettoized spaces, black political theory’s ghettoization from mainstream discussion, white mainstream theory’s ghettoization from reality.

Related Characters: Charles W. Mills (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *The Racial Contract*, Mills explains that he views himself as part of a long tradition of Black intellectuals, writers, and activists who have sought to expose and root out white supremacy. In this context, he explains what he hopes his work can do: reveal the structure of the racial contract from within the same white-dominated field (philosophy) that is primarily responsible for creating it. He can show how white philosophy’s authority and declarations about the nature of universal values are really the products of white supremacy—not the result of white philosophers’ claims to superior knowledge.

Accordingly, by showing “*where the bodies are buried*,” Mills aspires to create space for non-white philosophers and thereby make philosophy more relevant to people of color. By connecting his unconventional theory to mainstream academia, he helps give non-white thinkers like himself more power and legitimacy. And in doing so, he can potentially help fellow philosophers root out their biases and develop better theories of society and politics.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

White supremacy has profoundly shaped the contemporary world, but political philosophers virtually never discuss it in their writings. Instead, they mostly take white supremacy for granted, seeing it as natural and inevitable when it's really a powerful political system.

Philosophy remains one of the least diverse academic disciplines. Its occasional engagement with race often focuses on specific historical figures or political issues rather than the universal questions at its heart. Philosophers need a way to discuss racism in these universal terms, which is why Mills has developed the concept of a racial contract.

Mainstream contractarian theories argue that people form a society by freely agreeing to a "social contract." But Mills will argue that the contract is really only made between white people, who consider themselves fully human but view non-white people as subhuman. The original social contract theories claim that society is based on free individual consent, so these theories don't adequately explain why different social groups dominate and oppress one another. However, the racial contract theory does. It's intended to connect mainstream white philosophy's abstract discussions of justice with "Native American, African American, and Third and Fourth World political thought," which focuses on the history and effects of colonialism, racism, and slavery.

Contemporary philosophers like John Rawls imagine an ideal social contract in order to ask questions about justice. However, Mills's project is closer to that of early social contract theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who imagined how non-ideal social contracts could explain the actual society we live in. Similarly, feminist philosopher Carole Pateman explains male domination by imagining a "Sexual Contract" at the core of Western society.

Mills starts by naming white supremacy because his book is an attempt to explain the structure of modern society through this context. When Mills talks about white supremacy, he's not just talking about a prejudiced belief in white people's superiority to other people—he's talking about a political system that puts that belief into action.



Mills believes that philosophers often fail to recognize that race is an essential part of the human condition—it affects everyone, not just a select few. This means that philosophy that ignores race is not very helpful—and often actually harmful—when it comes to truly understanding or improving society. In developing the "racial contract" idea, Mills aims to discuss race in a way that speaks to everyone.



The social contract theory is important because it establishes the legitimacy of a government. If people form a government through a free and consensual social contract, this means that the government has a right to rule over those people. But if the government gains power through coercion, domination, and violence—which Mills argues is the historical truth about most currently existing states—then those governments don't truly represent the will of the people. Therefore, the racial contract theory is partially a response to the social contract theory's assumption that everyone in society has consented to being ruled over (when the realities of colonization and slavery show otherwise).



Contemporary philosophers view the social contract as an ideal theory, or a thought experiment for how society should look. Instead, theorists like Rousseau, Pateman, and Mills himself want to explain the way society actually is, including flaws like racism (as in Mills's racial contract) and sexism (as in Pateman's "Sexual Contract").



In this book, Mills will describe a non-ideal racial contract in order to explain white supremacy's internal logic and external effects. He hopes this will help his readers better understand the world and also question mainstream philosophy's "raceless" political theories. His three main points are that white supremacy exists; that white supremacy is a political system; and that it's useful to think of this political system as based on a racial contract among white people.

While the social contract is an explanation of how and why people form organized societies, the racial contract is a way of explaining how white supremacist states formed. In order to make this clear for his readers, Mills must first explain what white supremacy is and the historical role it's played in global politics.



CHAPTER 1, PART 1: THE RACIAL CONTRACT IS POLITICAL, MORAL, AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL

Mills explains that philosophers really talk about three kinds of social contracts: political, moral, and epistemological. Political contracts describe how people form society and a government. Moral contracts explain how people agree on laws and moral norms for their society. Epistemological contracts set out certain rules for thinking.

Mills breaks the racial contract down into political, moral, and epistemological agreements because these are the three levels at which the contract's signatories define themselves as a community. Those who agree to the racial contract (white people) view themselves as moral and rational citizens. In contrast, those excluded from the social contract (non-white people) are defined as non-citizens, amoral or immoral subpersons, and incapable of rational knowledge.



In the racial contract's epistemological contract, participants agree to classify themselves as "white" and therefore fully human. They categorize everyone else as "nonwhite," subhuman, and therefore exempt from the rules for human society that the political and moral contracts outline. In a nutshell, the racial contract is white people's agreement over how to control nonwhite people's "bodies, land, and resources."

When Mills describes the epistemological dimension of the racial contract, he points out that "white" and "nonwhite" aren't natural or preexisting categories. Rather, they are social constructs, or concepts formed by collective agreement. Those who make the racial contract define themselves (and their in-group) as white and use this arbitrary category as the basis for banding together and exploiting other groups for their own benefit. This is an epistemological contract because it's an agreement to understand the world in a certain way.



The racial contract's epistemological contract also affects its political and moral contracts. Politically, traditional social contract theory imagines "abstract raceless 'men'" establishing the state. Meanwhile, the racial contract theory shows how white people use race to seize and preserve power. In the traditional contract theory, people leave the state of nature and become civilized when they form society. But in the racial contract, certain people identify themselves as civilized white people, while defining everyone else—non-white people—as "savages" or "barbarians" who live in a state of nature and need white people to civilize them. Based on this division, white people create white supremacy: a political organization that facilitates and upholds their power, privilege, and control over non-white people.

The racial contract isn't just a modification of the social contract, in which the "abstract raceless 'men'" who form society happen to be white supremacists. Rather, it's fundamentally different because it shows that people divide themselves politically when they form society (into white citizens and non-white "barbarians"). In Mills's model, the formation of society is inherently coercive, not inherently consensual. By showing how the opposing concepts of civilization and the state of nature can be used to justify one racial group dominating another, Mills begins to show how the social contract (as an idea) is itself part of the racial contract (as a historical fact).



The racial contract also includes a different moral contract. Most traditional contractarian theorists view the moral contract as people's attempt to write down and enforce a preexisting, objective morality, usually based on the principle of freedom and equality for all human beings. However, the racial contract reserves natural freedom and equality for white men. These white men view non-white people as subhumans incapable of respecting natural law and therefore not subject to it.

Finally, the racial contract also transforms the traditional social contract's epistemology, or view of knowledge. Traditional theories are based on the idea of natural law, which could be defined as the objective reason and morality that God gives to humanity, or just as people's natural self-interest. In traditional social contract theories, the contract forms around this natural law: in order to become full members of society, people must commit to seeing natural law as the "correct, objective interpretation of the world."

Similarly, under the racial contract, people must consent to a specific way of viewing the world in order to join society. But this worldview is a set of distortions and misinterpretations that support white people's belief in white supremacy. Ironically, these collective distortions prevent white people from truly understanding the society they have built. Instead, they see "a racial fantasyland" where non-white people are not full humans but rather racist caricatures like Caliban, Shakespeare's animalistic Native character from [The Tempest](#). Literature and pop culture help white people impose these distorted fantasies on the world—and these fantasies enable slavery, colonialism, and genocide.

As in the social contract, the signatories to the racial contract make an agreement to recognize and protect one another's rights—but only while agreeing not to recognize or protect other people's rights. So just as white people define themselves as a political and racial community through the racial contract, they also define a set of moral values—freedom and equality—that's limited to their own in-group.



Mills argues that there is an epistemological contract underlying the racial contract because he sees that forming a society requires agreeing on a basic worldview. In particular, people must agree on basic assumptions about where human rights and freedoms come from, how the world is structured, and what the purpose of society is. This is part of why Mills thinks philosophy is so important: it helps identify and shape people's fundamental assumptions about the world. In turn, he thinks the social contract theory teaches people false assumptions about the world.



Ignorance is a powerful tool for the racial contract, which deceives its signatories into believing that they are merely agreeing to the social contract. In other words, it encourages them to convince themselves that they're participating in a fair and equal society, and that non-white people are justly excluded from this society because they are inferior. But in reality, they are participating in an oppressive society, in which they gain privileges by excluding non-white people. The racial contract's fantasies and mythologies about non-white become a self-fulfilling prophecy: white people believe that the fantasies are true and force non-white people to fulfill those fantasies. Then, they point to this as evidence that the fantasies were right in the first place.



CHAPTER 1, PART 2: THE RACIAL CONTRACT IS A HISTORICAL ACTUALITY

Although contemporary philosophers generally use social contract theories as a thought experiment, rather than an actual historical explanation for the formation of society, Mills argues that the racial contract is real and historically verifiable. It wasn't a one-time agreement, but rather the product of Europeans exploring and conquering the rest of the world, starting with Christopher Columbus. Accordingly, whereas the social contract only explains the formation of individual nation-states, the racial contract explains the *global* political, economic, and social order.

Mills hopes that the racial contract will explain the last 500 years of global history by contextualizing how and why Europeans subjugated and exploited the rest of the world for their own benefit. Although this was a long-term process rather than a true contract made in any individual moment, it has created deep and enduring imbalances in power, wealth, and status in the present day.



Over time, Europeans consolidated their power through a variety of legal, political, and theological texts that collectively served as a kind of contract. These include, for instance, proclamations from the pope, laws about the status of white and non-white people, and public debates about the ethics of colonialism. These texts established hierarchies of human value based on religion, geography, and culture, which were eventually combined into the simplified concept of “race.”

Europeans began legally categorizing non-white as inferior status by defining people’s rationality—and therefore their human rights—based on their willingness to accept Christianity as objective truth. For instance, Spanish conquistadors announced to Native Americans that the pope divinely ordained Spanish rule over the Americas. This meant that anyone who didn’t accept Spanish rule didn’t have human rights, so could be legally killed or enslaved.

During the Enlightenment, Europeans replaced this religious distinction between human believers versus subhuman nonbelievers with a scientific distinction between white humans and non-white “entities who are *humanoid* but not fully *human*.” Based on this distinction, Europeans developed different legal strategies for exploiting different groups of people in different parts of the world.

For instance, in what Mills calls “the expropriation contract,” white lawyers and judges argued that native peoples were incapable of having property rights or forming true nations, like animals, so their land belonged to white people.

In “the slavery contract,” courts gave white people the legal right to hold Native American and African people as slaves, because it was widely believed that non-white people were inferior and needed to be civilized through slavery.

Here, Mills defines the racial contract as a legal agreement made up of many separate writings and decisions made by numerous people over a long period of time. He also touches on the idea that race is an arbitrary way of categorizing people—one that overly simplifies other characteristics like what people believe, where they live, or which cultures they belong to.



In the first phase of colonialism, Europeans used religion to divide people, essentially categorizing Christians as human and non-Christians as subhuman. This was a convenient justification for conquest and slavery, since deeming Native people as inferior meant that it was morally acceptable to exploit or kill them.



The Enlightenment was a 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement that saw the rise of philosophy and science (as opposed to religion) as ways of understanding the world. However, the racial distinction between humans and subhumans did not fade away during this time: it only took another form. This provides important context for Mills’s critique of Enlightenment thought, as it was sometimes used to further the divide between racial groups and perpetuate the idea that non-white people are “not fully human.”



The expropriation contract, which justified the theft of native people’s lands, is the basis for how land and property is distributed in the modern era. Those lands were never returned, and Europeans and their descendants have continued to profit off of them since they were initially colonized.



Similarly, the slavery contract legally justified slavery through religious and philosophical arguments. This enabled white people to profit off of enslaved people’s labor for several centuries. Since the wealth stolen by white slaveowners has never been returned to the descendants of the people who created it, the slavery contract is partially responsible for the vast inequality between white and non-white people in the Americas today.



Finally, in “the colonial contract,” European thinkers and governments gave themselves the right to rule the rest of the world by claiming that white people were inherently superior. By contrast, they claimed that non-white people were naturally inferior and therefore incapable of forming democratic societies.

Europeans set up dual systems of government based on these contracts (or collections of laws, philosophical writings, and court opinions). In these dual governments, non-Europeans were subject to a different set of laws because they were “a separate category of beings.” Therefore, racism is not just an unfortunate anomaly in European history: rather, it’s the foundation of European culture, including the Enlightenment’s humanistic philosophy. This philosophy was fundamentally based on the principle “that only Europeans were human.”

However, most philosophers still ignore how slavery and colonialism fundamentally shaped European art and philosophy. In reality, for the white European and American public, white supremacy was viewed as common sense until the mid-1900s. Although the white public hesitates to recognize it, this racist common sense is still the basis of modern political institutions and global power structures.

For example, the United States was founded as a white supremacist slave state, built on land claimed through expropriation and genocide. Its Constitution enshrined nonwhite people’s inferior status into law. This is also true of other settler states, like Canada, Australia, and South Africa. These countries’ laws have changed over time, but very slowly, and they’re still based on white supremacy. For instance, until very recently, the U.S., Canada, and Australia only allowed white people to immigrate and become citizens.

The colonial contract primarily applies to European and American imperial rule in Africa and Asia. It’s based on the same logic as the expropriation and slavery contracts: European nations legally justified colonialism by arguing that white people are inherently superior on biological, religious, cultural, and/or moral grounds.



The racial contract founded white supremacist society much like a constitution founds a government: it laid out the basic principles and constraints for the society’s formation. One of these basic principles was dividing people into different categories of humanity based on race, which allowed a deeply divided and unequal society to form. In turn, this arrangement is responsible for the modern-day inequality between white and non-white people around the world. As racism was one of the basic principles in the formation of society, Mills believes that it’s wrong for other philosophers to claim that it’s only an anomaly or deviation from the Enlightenment political ideal of equality. As he points out here, these Enlightenment ideals were really restricted to a small part of humanity (white people).



Mills critiques European and American philosophy by showing that, beyond ignoring racism, these schools of thought are largely founded on racism. If 17th-, 18th-, 19th-, and early 20th-century Euro-American philosophers do not mention race, this is likely only because white supremacy was common sense to them, so it did not need to be explained or justified. But the recent shift away from explicit white supremacy has done little to change contemporary societies’ underlying political and economic structure. In fact, for Mills, it is a way of maintaining this same structure by denying reality and refusing to change.



Notably, Mills tells a version of U.S. history that’s drastically different from the nationalistic version most North Americans are likely to learn in school. Much religion and philosophy were used to justify white supremacy in the past, oftentimes history is retold in order to glorify American white supremacy in the present. Although the U.S., Canada, and Australia have recently changed their immigration policies to accept non-white people, before this the borders were open to Europeans for more than a century. As a result, older generations of European immigrants have had much longer to build wealth in these countries. This wealth gap is a product of historical white supremacy, which illustrates how seemingly race-neutral policies can actually be a continuation of racist policies in the past.



These examples show how European colonizers collectively subdued the rest of the world, acting in a kind of global alliance. Mills concludes that our contemporary world is “built on the Racial Contract.” This is obvious when looking at the historical record, yet it’s not obvious to most white people. This is because they learn to see white supremacy “as just ‘the way things are.’” This includes Anglo-American philosophers, who have largely failed to identify and analyze the modern world’s white supremacist foundations.

The enormous gap between most white people’s assumptions and the actual historical record is further evidence that the racial contract continues to powerfully shape the way that white people perceive the world. Specifically, it teaches them to perceive it in a distorted way that hides the real source of the wealth gap between white and non-white people: genocide, slavery, and colonialism. The fact that this distorts even the perception of philosophers—whose role is to analyze the world as objectively as possible—further speaks to the power of white supremacy in the modern world.



CHAPTER 1, PART 3: THE RACIAL CONTRACT IS AN EXPLOITATION CONTRACT THAT CREATES GLOBAL EUROPEAN ECONOMIC DOMINATION AND NATIONAL WHITE RACIAL PRIVILEGE

The traditional social contract includes an economic dimension, because it says that people form societies in order to accumulate property and fairly protect their rights to that property. However, the traditional social contract isn’t primarily economic in nature. In contrast, the racial contract is: it’s designed to enable “white/persons” to systematically exploit “nonwhite/subpersons.”

The traditional social contract is intended to explain the formation of legitimate governments, which serve the good of the people. In contrast, the racial contract is intended to explain the racial inequality and exploitation that have occurred for hundreds of years. In the racial contract, people form governments in order to consolidate their own power and exploit others for profit. From Mills’s perspective, the social contract covers up historical exploitation by imagining that everyone in society consented to it.



Most white historians attribute Europe’s economic dominance to developments *in Europe* (like culture, geographical conditions, or technological progress). But non-white historians have shown that slavery and colonialism really explain both European countries’ wealth and the enduring poverty of colonized and enslaved people and countries. As a whole, Europe has profited immensely and consistently from exploiting the non-European world.

Like the theory of the social contract, white historians’ common explanation for European economic growth replaces accurate historical explanation (Europe’s colonization of non-European nations) with a fantasy of racial supremacy. This kind of history is part of white supremacy’s system of cognitive distortion.



This process of exploitation continues today: the old colonial nations, their offshoot nations (like the U.S.), and those nations’ financial institutions and multinational corporations dominate the global economy. White people control a disproportionate and growing portion of global wealth. In fact, the economy continuously redistributes wealth from poor non-white people to already-wealthy white people.

Mills again emphasizes that, although white supremacy is no longer the letter of the law, it is still an informal norm: the same countries that used to colonize the non-European world and exploit its resources through the law now do so through private industry and international institutions, in accordance with the law. The Global South still provides the majority of the material and labor that create wealth in the Global North. Mills emphasizes that while this is a change in the form and ideology of white supremacy, the underlying structure hasn’t changed.



Wealthy settler states like the U.S. are still systematically segregated and unequal. Non-white people have fewer economic opportunities and far less wealth, which is evidence of how the racial contract has prevented them from building wealth across generations. This is because of formal policies in addition to informal discrimination in wages, employment, capital investment, housing, education, and more.

In fact, just in the U.S., slavery and discrimination have cost Black people several trillion dollars. With interest added, the nation owes them reparations worth more than the whole country's combined household wealth.

This evidence shows that racial exploitation is really the foundation of the U.S. economy. But moral theorists who talk about justice ignore the basic injustice of longstanding racial exploitation precisely because it's so fundamental: challenging it means questioning the nation's legitimacy as a whole.

The racial contract operates on a national scale, in addition to a global one. Although it evolves through different phases, the cumulative weight of these various phases maintains global inequality over time. Meanwhile, the racial contract's defenders can easily say that formal inequality only existed in the past because its more explicit and severe stages have long since disappeared.



Looking at the actual economic costs of slavery, it's clear that white people's wealth in the U.S. is in large part the result of labor that was stolen from Black slaves (and the compounded interest on that labor). Today, the economy still maintains white supremacy by sustaining the power and wealth imbalances created in the past.



Moral philosophers are concerned with explaining the legitimacy of the state and improving society. As such, the racial contract is a fundamental threat to their philosophical project, because it shows that the state is essentially based on theft, coercion, and exploitation.



CHAPTER 2, PART 1: THE RACIAL CONTRACT NORMS (AND RACES) SPACES, DEMARCATING CIVIL AND WILD SPACES

Unlike the ordinary social contract theory, the racial contract shows how space is *raced*, or understood as dominated by a specific racial group. Similarly, it shows how individuals are *spaced*, or understood as belonging to a specific racialized space.

According to white social contract theory, Europeans turned Europe from a “presociopolitical space” (the state of nature) into a “postsociopolitical space” (a civilized land). Meanwhile, they viewed non-Europeans as “**savages**” (meaning “the wild man of the wood”) who were inherently wild and therefore permanently stuck in the state of nature (unlike civilized Europeans). To reinforce this distinction, European colonizers emphasized the wildness and alienness of non-European spaces. This allowed them to justify colonialism as “an active *spatial* struggle [...] against the savage and barbaric.”

The racial contract connects race to space because its original purpose was to enable European colonization—or Europe's domination of non-European spaces and peoples.



Mills again shows how European colonialism and social contract theories shared the same ideological assumptions. Namely, colonialism required dividing the world into Europe and non-Europe, and European philosophers divided the world into civilization and the state of nature. Conveniently, these categories converged, so that Europe conquering and dominating non-Europe appeared identical to civilization spreading out into the state of nature. This allowed European philosophers to paint brutal violence and genocide as a form of benevolent progress.



Mills explains that Europeans raced spaces in both epistemological way and moral ways. Epistemologically, they insisted that “real knowledge” is spatially limited to Europe. To justify this prejudice, they destroyed evidence of non-European art and science, or else attributed them to Europeans. Similarly, the European obsession with “discovery’ and ‘exploration’” implies that certain spaces are blank or empty until white people visit them and transform them into civilized spaces through colonialism. In other words, Europe declares itself “the *global locus of rationality*.”

Morally, Europe also defined itself as the global center of virtue. European cartographers and settlers portrayed the world outside Europe as a monstrous and immoral version of the state of nature, particularly because it wasn’t Christianized. The trope of “*the journey into the interior*” depends on moralizing space this way: when Europeans visit native territory, it’s often portrayed as confronting their own inner darkness as well. Space is still moralized today, with majority-white places portrayed as light and virtuous, but majority-non-white places as dark, evil, and backwards. In countries like the U.S. and South Africa, segregation strictly maintains that division.

In the modern day, the moral dimension of racialized space is less about Christian vice and virtue than the secular idea of “progress and modernization.” Europeans view places not adapted to their own agricultural and industrial methods as empty, or “virgin,” and ripe for settlement. Any native people living there are viewed as pests who need to be cleared out for Europeans to civilize the land. Even today, majority-non-white spaces (like U.S. inner cities) are viewed as foreign to the nation, and they often lack the political representation and public services that majority-white spaces receive.

Finally, the racial contract norms bodies themselves. It teaches white people to view non-white people primarily as physical bodies (rather than human beings with bodies and minds), or as representatives of their race (rather than complex and unique individuals). There are even different rules of social etiquette for interacting within and between racial groups.

European’s insistence that they had superior knowledge discredited non-Europeans’ thought and perspectives. Since colonialism’s non-European victims were the people most likely to speak out against it, discounting them in this way prevented Europeans from taking their criticisms seriously. This results in the assumption that European perspectives on the world are the only legitimate ones—that they are “the global locus of rationality”—even when these perspectives are used as excuses for violence and exploitation.



Stories of travel and exploration (both today and particularly at the height of European colonialism) tend to depict white people leaving relatively comfortable lives and wealthy home countries—often in order to investigate poorer, “darker,” more sinister, and less urbanized places. The traveler also undergoes a process of self-discovery, which ends when the traveler returns home with a new knowledge about themselves. Mills argues that this trope is actually based on the moral superiority aspect of the racial contract, which was used to justify Europe’s colonization of non-European nations.



Just like ideas of white superiority, justifications for colonization also gradually switched from using religious language to using the language of science and rationality. In this passage, Mills is explicitly talking about the contemporary world. Spreading “progress and modernization” is essentially the main goal of modern international institutions, but Mills points out that this means forcing non-white peoples to live according to European economic and political norms. One example is the story that “developing countries” are lagging behind Europe and North America and need to catch up by copying Western economic models. Another is the story that white Americans have to morally and culturally fix inner cities (which are predominately Black and Latinx). While there are many genuine social problems in these spaces, these stories about politics are dangerous because they suggest that white outsiders are especially capable of solving non-white people’s problems.



For Mills’s readers, the racialization of bodies and everyday spaces is probably much more familiar than the other examples he talks about in this chapter. People behave differently around others of different races—and not only because of their individual prejudices, but because of social and historical facts about the society they live in. In this way, the racial contract transforms the way people take up space and allow others to do the same.



CHAPTER 2, PART 2: THE RACIAL CONTRACT NORMS (AND RACES) THE INDIVIDUAL, ESTABLISHING PERSONHOOD AND SUBPERSONHOOD

Just like classical social contract theorists tend to ignore space, they also ignore the body. This is because they implicitly assume that only white men are capable of participating in society. In contrast, the racial contract is primarily about defining which people are capable of joining society.

The distinction between those who can and cannot join society is originally based on Aristotle's idea that some people are naturally destined for slavery. For centuries, Europeans have looked for ways to clearly distinguish natural slaves from naturally free people, or real citizens from sub-citizens. At first, they based this on the distinction between Christians and Muslims. Later, they began using the category of race, in part because it's more permanent.

In the racial contract, people are raced in a *moral and legal* way, a *cognitive* way, and an *aesthetic* way.

Morally and legally, the racial contract divides persons from subpersons. The social contract's vision of a modern society governed through the rule of law depends on Kant's argument that all *persons* are inherently morally equal. However, the racial contract excludes non-white people from this moral equality by arguing that they are *subpersons*. Therefore, the Kantian ideal of equality turns into "equality among equals." Meanwhile, non-white people get an inferior set of rights and freedoms in society.

As a result, while the social contract theory presents racism as a "deviation" from perfect equality, the racial contract theory shows that racially unequal societies have actually been *following* their founding white supremacist ideal: personhood for white people and subpersonhood for non-white people.

Mills implies that classical social contract theorists assume that society is made of white men because they are white men. They tend to mistake their specific social position for a neutral or objective one, and they are never forced to imagine the world from anyone else's perspective. As a result, white philosophers can talk about a raceless society only because they confuse whiteness with racelessness.



The history that Mills cites here shows how categorizing people into different groups has always been powerful people's strategy for justifying hierarchies that profit them. The idea of natural slavery is particularly appealing for those with political and economic power because it allows them to blame the violence they commit on the people they are exploiting, and not on their own decision to exploit those people.



These three aspects of race allow the white people who form the racial contract to insist that their privilege is based on their moral and legal, cognitive, and aesthetic superiority. In reality, it's the other way around: their power creates their sense of superiority.



Mills hints at his full critique of Enlightenment philosophy: their social contract is really part of the racial contract. Essentially, the racial contract includes the social contract for white people and the expropriation, slavery, and colonial contracts for non-white people. Because many white people do not fully recognize non-white people's humanity, they wrongly think that they live under the social contract, when they really live under the racial contract. It's true that all persons get freedom and equality—the problem is that the philosophy of the social contract, like the contemporary idea of race-neutral politics, is based on limiting the scope of who counts as persons.



By showing that racism is the norm in social contract theory, not the exception, Mills refutes those social philosophers who would insist that the social contract can be rescued from its founders' racism or is still useful as a social ideal.



These societies have applied different versions of the racial contract (the expropriation contract, the slavery contract, and the colonial contract) to different categories of non-white people. Meanwhile, white people identify themselves as white because they do *not* belong to any of those categories. Indeed, people generally understand their own racial group through other racial groups' eyes—for instance, in the U.S., white and Black people's identities depend on the historical and social opposition between them.

Mills argues here that the racial contract actually creates racial categories. Essentially, Europeans first set up specific social, political, and economic arrangements to exploit different groups of non-Europeans, and then categorized those non-Europeans depending on what kind of arrangements they were forced into. This shows that racial categories are not absolute, and they generally don't exist before groups come into contact with one another. It also shows how these categories transform over time, depending on social and political conditions.



The racial contract also races people cognitively. The social contract theory claims that everyone in society can cooperate because of their shared rationality. However, the racial contract purports that non-white subpersons *lack* rationality and therefore can't participate as equals in society.

Assessing others' rationality is really a way of deciding others' fitness for participation in society. By characterizing non-white people as irrational, Europeans justified excluding non-Europeans from making political decisions or wielding any significant amount of power.



The idea that non-white people are not fully rational started with medieval theologians. Then, it spread to Enlightenment philosophers (including Locke, Hume, Kant, Voltaire, and Mills) who argued that non-white people were intellectually inferior and couldn't rule themselves. Later, European pseudoscientists tried to prove the same hypothesis by measuring people's brains, bone structures, heads, and IQs. Based on the myth of non-white intellectual inferiority, states founded on the racial contract deny non-white people basic legal and political rights.

Europeans' historical debates over non-white people's rationality evolved alongside the European intellectual establishment. Religion gave way to philosophy and then to science as a source of authority, but each time, scholars found a new justification for declaring non-white people subhuman. These justifications are all demonstrably false, but scholars' deep commitment to racism shows how powerfully white supremacy distorts their thinking.



Finally, the racial contract races people *aesthetically* by establishing whiteness as the standard of beauty. This often gets conflated with goodness and desirability. Moreover, all people's bodies are evaluated against the white beauty standard. Black people are furthest from this standard, and in particular, Black women suffer the double oppression of being judged primarily according to their appearance but never meeting the white beauty ideal.

Unequal beauty standards also contribute to discrimination and prejudice against non-white people because they shape who gets power and privilege in society. Like the concepts of moral personhood and rationality, beauty becomes the basis for a hierarchy that puts certain human lives above others.



CHAPTER 2, PART 3: THE RACIAL CONTRACT UNDERWRITES THE MODERN SOCIAL CONTRACT AND IS CONTINUALLY BEING REWRITTEN

As radical feminist thinkers have pointed out, patriarchy is much older than racism. This is because racism only came about in the modern era, through the racial contract. (In fact, Mills thinks that the racial contract created the very concept of race, as well as racism based on it.)

The classical social contract theorists, who believed in liberty and equality for all people, were writing from about 1615–1800. At the same time, European colonizers were massacring and enslaving non-white people around the world. This is an obvious contradiction. But there's a clear explanation for it: European philosophers thought that only white men really counted as people. Therefore, when they philosophized about the social contract, they were really proposing the racial contract. Mills will next examine the key writings of the four major classic social contract theorists—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant—to show that they openly wanted to reserve personhood, and therefore membership in society, exclusively for white men.

Thomas Hobbes famously argued that the state of nature is a constant state of war, in which people live “nasty, brutish, and short” lives. He argued that this state of nature never actually existed, but in the next paragraph, he claimed that “**savage** people” in the Americas were currently living in it. Mills argues that this apparent contradiction is only possible because Hobbes meant that the state of nature never existed *for white people* (whom he considered rational enough to choose to live under a government).

Mills puts racism in historical context so that he can explain what kind of ideas and circumstances drove it, and therefore what kind of ideas and circumstances can help end it. Of course, he's not suggesting that people of different races always lived in harmony before racism—rather, he's saying that people only started sorting one another into a hierarchy of racial categories in the modern world (meaning after the beginning of European colonialism in the late 15th century).



In this passage, Mills states his core argument about philosophy's responsibility for the racial contract: Enlightenment philosophers proposed the person/subperson distinction that the racial contract needed to function, and then also theorized about the social contract in order to suggest that their vision of society was truly ideal. In other words, the social contract was like a deceptive marketing campaign for colonialism. Philosophers argued that Europeans would create better, more “civilized” societies around the world, when they were really destroying other countries and massacring and enslaving other peoples.



In Hobbes's philosophy, people form society in order to avoid living in the treacherous state of nature—and forming society means submitting to the rule of a government. Therefore, he suggested that Europeans were rational because they chose to live under governments, while “savage people” were inferior because they either chose not to live in society or never realized that living in society would be better for them. Because “savages” didn't realize that it was better to be ruled over by a government, Hobbes's thinking goes, it would be justified for Europeans to impose government on them. In short, Hobbes's theory of society leads to a justification for colonialism.



Although Hobbes makes a clear moral and cognitive distinction between white and non-white people, he was controversial in Europe because he suggested that Europeans hypothetically *could have lived* in a state of nature—meaning they could fall to the same level as non-white people. But later social contract theories divided white and non-white people more strictly, which shows that over time, “the Racial Contract began to rewrite the social contract.”

The difference that Mills highlights between Hobbes and later Enlightenment philosophers is that Hobbes didn't believe in an essential difference between white and non-white people—he thought that white people could live like uncivilized savages, and non-white people could live in society (meaning under the power of a government). The fact that Hobbes's hierarchy was less strict than later philosophers' shows that racism—or the idea of an inherent hierarchy among different racial groups—actually strengthened over time in European philosophy. This also disproves the common assumption that modern societies automatically become more egalitarian and less racist over time.



Next, John Locke imagined the state of nature as a kind of cooperative society based on the natural laws of money and private property. Therefore, he argued that “Industrious and Rational” people had a God-given right to use the earth—by which he meant settling land and establishing farms. Because Native Americans didn't live in this kind of settlement pattern, Locke concluded that they didn't have a true right to own their land as property. In contrast, he thought, Europeans had a God-given right to take and settle this land.

For Locke, natural laws were simply the common-sense basis of all legitimate human society. But from a contemporary perspective, it's easy to see how Locke's assumptions about how money, property, and God-given rights should work are actually specific to European Protestantism. When Locke didn't understand non-European civilization, he simply decided that this civilization must not exist at all. In other words Locke preferred to deny other people's humanity, rather than considering the possibility that there might be other legitimate ways to view the world.



Locke also defended enslaving people under some circumstances. While these did not include the circumstances in which Europeans enslaved Africans, Locke personally invested in slave traders. The best explanation for this “astonishing inconsistency” is that Locke didn't see Black people as fully human.

Locke's position on slavery looks contradictory today, as it is, of course, widely understood that non-white people are human. But to Locke and the people around him, this contradiction wasn't even noticeable, because non-white people were widely believed to be subhuman. This is not a way of excusing Locke's bigotry as simply a product of his time—rather, it's a way of showing how racism was seen as common sense, and how deeply Lock incorporated racist beliefs into his thinking. Instead of ignoring the grave social and historical errors in past philosophers' work, Mills implies, contemporary scholars should seriously examine how those errors influenced the work in question.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously imagined the “noble **savage**” living freely in the state of nature. However, he only depicted non-white people as savages. Meanwhile, he argued that Europe was superior because of its special metallurgy and agriculture, which he believed the Americas didn't have. However, Mills points out that the Aztec and Inca had highly developed metallurgy and agriculture. Based on “massive historical amnesia and factual misrepresentation,” Rousseau defined non-white people as savages and white people as civilized.

Unlike most other social contract theorists, Rousseau praised “noble savages” and looked down on civilization, which he considered oppressive and vile. In this sense, his theory resembles Mills's, because both of them want to look at how society actually formed (and not how an ideal society would be structured). However, Rousseau's “massive historical amnesia and factual misinterpretation” make his lofty historical goals irrelevant: although he pretended to write an accurate history, he really ended up writing a prejudiced theory of human hierarchy.



Finally, Immanuel Kant imagined the social contract as an imaginary agreement among abstract people, whose personhood is defined by their rationality. He also invented the modern concept of race by arguing that people fit into essential and unchanging racial categories. He then argued that race determines rationality (or intelligence). White philosophers generally view Kant's racism as an irrelevant footnote, but it was clearly important to Kant, who focused much of his career on arguing for the inferiority of non-white people.

Kant explicitly connected race to personhood, which Mills has identified as the racial contract's moral and legal standard for equal inclusion in society. Although not the first to connect race, rationality, and political rights, Kant was the first of the major social contract theorists to say that membership in society should depend entirely on rationality (rather than historical or cultural factors). Essentially, he argued that non-white people were incapable of rational thinking and were therefore subhuman and undeserving of basic human rights and liberties. This is a far more extreme position than his predecessors'. In Hobbes's worldview, white people could fall back into the state of nature. Locke, too, implied that non-white people could theoretically start obeying natural laws. And Rousseau suggested that it would be possible for non-Europeans to have metallurgy and agriculture—he just ignored the fact that they actually did. Kant, then, was seemingly the first to say that non-white people were essentially and unalterably inferior to white people. Whereas Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau's theories imply that white people can "civilize" nonwhite people, Kant's implies that non-white people would never be able to overcome their inferiority or achieve equality with white people. Beyond laying the foundation for modern genocidal race politics, Kant's theory of race also shows how racism gradually solidified itself over time, transforming from a vague sense of European superiority into a rigid hierarchy of absolute categories.



Kant drew up a detailed hierarchy of different races depending on "their degree of innate *talent*." He argued that this included their ability to recognize morality and respect others' humanity. By putting white people on top of this hierarchy, he argued that only white people are fully rational, fully human, and fully capable of joining a social contract. Mills points out that contemporary white philosophers agonize about how some of their idols, like Paul de Man and Martin Heidegger, were Nazis. Meanwhile, they overlook the fact that Kant, the most important modern philosopher of all, invented the racial hierarchy that the Nazis used to justify the Holocaust.

Even though Kant is famous for making clear analytical distinctions, his ambiguous concept of "innate talent" generally isn't seen as scientifically valid today. Again, this shows how racism presents itself as common sense, and how common sense constantly transforms over time. Mills views Kant's theory of race as the prototype for contemporary racism because Kant was the first to neatly organize people into racial categories and then put those categories into a strict hierarchy. Because this worldview is inflexible, it's conducive to extreme political measures like genocide or slavery. In contrast, for Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, non-white people's potential equality with white people meant that they were simply less human and still had some political rights. This is why Mills concludes that Kant laid the philosophical groundwork for the Holocaust: he was the first to explicitly argue that non-white people are subhuman and do not deserve equality, human rights, or basic political freedoms.



Mills concludes that the racial contract “underwrites the social contract,” meaning that it “restricts and modifies” the community to whom the social contract applies. As the racial contract changes across time and space, the scope of the social contract changes, too. Therefore, both the racial and social contracts are “continually being rewritten” as political and historical conditions change.

The racial contract is like the fine print under the social contract: if the social contract describes a just society for human beings, the racial contract specifies who really counts as a human being. This is why white philosophers can sincerely believe they’re developing theories of justice that apply to everyone, yet never mention slavery, colonialism, or global inequality. They aren’t really talking about everyone, but they don’t realize this because white supremacy distorts their worldview.



Mills divides world history into three periods: first is the time before white supremacy. Next is the era of “formal, juridical white supremacy” during colonization, slavery, and legally enshrined segregation. Finally, there’s the present day, in which “de facto” or informal white supremacy reigns.

Mills’s three periods again show how the racial contract adapts over time to preserve white supremacy. The shift from the second to the third historical period—formal to informal white supremacy—is crucial for understanding Mills’s argument. This is because this shift has enabled contemporary politics and philosophy to claim race-neutrality while still perpetuating white supremacy.



In today’s epoch of informal white supremacy, the racial hierarchy is no longer written into law. Nevertheless, white people continue to dominate the globe because of social, economic, political, and cultural power that they acquired through colonization, slavery, and segregation. Most white people no longer explicitly believe in white supremacy, and non-white people formally have rights. But the racial contract still functions implicitly, through informal mechanisms like widespread discrimination, misallocation of resources, and a general public acceptance of deep inequality, both globally and within nations.

During the era of formal white supremacy, the notion of a racial hierarchy was common sense to most white people. Now, discrimination happens more subtly, and race-neutrality appears to be the new common sense. By encouraging white people to assume that racism no longer exists, this common sense prevents them from taking steps to correct the inequality that still exists. Therefore, to Mills, race-neutral ideology is clearly just another cognitive distortion that helps white people justify their power and privilege without having to give any of it up.



Globally, modern capitalism makes it difficult to see how Europe and North America’s wealth depends on the rest of the world. Many white thinkers attribute Europe’s success to its unique rationality and the rest of the world’s poverty to “local folly and geographical blight.”

Race-neutrality implies that global imbalances in wealth and power between white and non-white people are not the product of white supremacy, but rather of inherent historical, cultural, or biological differences. Ironically, this ultimately leads back to another argument for white racial superiority. This shows that contemporary white race-blindness doesn’t mean that white supremacy or the racial contract have ended: these ways of thinking and of organizing society have just become subtler over time.



Within multiracial nations, white people pretend that non-white people are political equals yet continue to systematically discriminate against them and mobilize political resources to deny them actual equality. As a result, while non-white people constantly confront implicit racism, white people simply deny that it exists—just like fish who can't see the water they're swimming in.

When white and non-white people debate the importance of race in society, Mills argues, they're really debating whether the racial contract exists. As a hypothetical theory of how society *should* work, the social contract replaces difficult realities with idealized abstractions. Namely, it abstracts away from racism and instead talks about the structure of society as though racism didn't exist. As numerous non-white scholars have pointed out, this creates a kind of imaginary neutrality that hides actual racism.

This imaginary neutrality is what allows the world's most influential white philosophers to write up elaborate theories of justice and society without ever mentioning racism or slavery. Mills concludes that these white philosophers are still thinking within and according to the racial contract. Instead of recognizing the racial contract's existence, history, and effects, they instead imagine that racism never existed and pretend that the present situation of severe global inequality is a "neutral baseline." Often, they even pretend that there is no historical or economic connection between the First World's wealth and the Third World's poverty.

The racial contract also evolves by shifting the definitions of whiteness and non-whiteness. Over time, whiteness generally expands to include more people, although certain groups (like the Nazis) occasionally try to shrink it. Indeed, Europeans frequently discriminate against other Europeans, such as "the Irish, Slavs, Mediterraneans, and above all, of course, Jews." This shows that there are internal hierarchies inside the categories of whiteness and the category of non-whiteness. This also proves that race is social, not biological, as groups get classified differently depending on the context.

These examples show how contemporary race-neutrality is really an attempt to rescue white supremacy by disguising it. Here, Mills also points out that white supremacy makes white people unaware of what they're doing. This helps explain why white philosophers—as well as the white public—often believe that they are truly defending equality and justice, when they are actually advocating for racial inequality and injustice.



Abstraction is important in philosophy, which is essentially based on grouping information and experiences together into concepts, and then determining the relationships among those concepts. However, Mills points out that philosophers often bring their biases and prejudices into the abstraction process. For instance, they base their theories on concepts that are only relevant to certain groups of people, but which they imagine to be universal. Often, this is because they cannot imagine seeing the world from the perspective of a non-white person. As a result, their theories are not only disconnected from people's real experiences—they're also far less useful in the real world, because they don't speak to many of the most important social and political problems facing humanity.



The examples that Mills provides here illustrate how bias often leads philosophers to justify inequalities rather than challenging them. By discussing society and justice without historical context, they pretend that racial inequality is a minor glitch in the history of progressive societies. But the racial contract has always included white philosophers and will always include them as long as white supremacy persists, so they do not even see it—they see the social contract instead. This leads them to continue assuming that the social contract is a useful metaphor for the experience of people living in society, when in reality it doesn't describe the lived experiences of most people.



Although most people identify with the same racial group throughout their lifetimes, on a broader historical scale, these categories are flexible social constructs that adapt to specific social and political conditions. The levels of privilege within whiteness do not disprove Mills's argument that white supremacy divides the world between white and non-white people—after all, there are also many divisions of privilege within non-whiteness. Rather, this just means that certain groups' whiteness is precarious: they can be excluded from the racial contract at any time.



CHAPTER 2, PART 4: THE RACIAL CONTRACT HAS TO BE ENFORCED THROUGH VIOLENCE AND IDEOLOGICAL CONDITIONING

Mills explains that different political philosophies imagine the state differently. According to the social contract, the state is legitimate because people consent to its authority and then use it to form an equal community and pass laws to govern themselves. But there are also other models of the state, including communitarian, corporatist, anarchist, and Marxist ones. Mills argues that there should be one more: “the racial, or white-supremacist, state.”

Under the social contract theory, the state only uses force to protect the people, but the white supremacist state uses force to control “the subperson population.” Specifically, it enacts this control through *violence* and *ideology*.

The white supremacist state first asserted itself through brutal violence, by committing genocide in the Americas and Australia, launching brutal wars in Africa and Asia, and imposing slavery on millions of people. European forces removed non-white people from their land (in the expropriation contract), or else forced them to work on it under constant surveillance (in the slavery and colonial contracts). In the slavery contract, Europeans forced enslaved people to accept their status as subhumans through brutal practices like “seasoning” or “breaking” them through torture when they first arrived in the New World.

After establishing itself, the white supremacist state enforces the racial contract by punishing crimes against white people and stopping dissent and rebellion among non-white people. This explains police brutality’s long history in the U.S., where the police have historically served as an occupying army in Black neighborhoods. It also explains why crimes against white people are punished disproportionately: they represent a threat “to a system predicated on nonwhite subpersonhood.” For instance, Europeans frequently punished slave uprisings, colonial rebellions, and even peaceful protests through disproportionate violence, in order to maintain the racial order. Similarly, extrajudicial violence is commonly committed against non-white people, who are seen as “*inherently* bestial and *savage*.” Lynching and vigilante killing are common examples.

The social contract’s original purpose was to explain what makes a state legitimate. But Mills suggests that this isn’t a useful task for philosophy, because the states that most people live under aren’t based on legitimate popular consent. Rather, they’re based on one group banding together to exploit another. Therefore, theorizing about “the racial, or white-supremacist, state” can actually help people improve the world, and forming a legitimate state in the contemporary world would require taking race into account (in order to undo white supremacy) rather than pretending that it doesn’t exist.



While violence and ideological coercion aren’t the white supremacist state’s main purpose or goal, these methods are what makes the white supremacist state morally reprehensible in Mills’s view. In other words, this violence and ideological coercion violate the very values that the social contract pretends to uphold: freedom, equality, and justice.



The violence of European colonialism has enduring consequences in the present, because it’s what allowed European people to initially seize non-white people’s land, wealth, and resources. Crucially, this was state-sponsored violence: whereas similar actions today would be illegal, at the time, this violence was involved in establishing the rule of law in European colonies. This shows that, contrary to the social contract theory, these states were actually based on illegitimate violence, not legitimate consent.



White supremacist nations commit state-sponsored violence in order to maintain their stratified racial hierarchies. In fact, Mills suggests that they require a baseline level of constant violence in order to prevent their exploited workforce and underclasses from rebelling against the entire political system. White supremacy’s alliance with extrajudicial vigilantes further shows that the law is fundamentally geared toward protecting white people’s interests and is carried out through coercion, not the people’s legitimate consent. In the social contract’s terms, that would make a state illegitimate.



Next, the white supremacist state also uses ideological coercion to maintain the racial hierarchy. Namely, it uses a “depersonalizing conceptual apparatus” to teach people to see non-white people as subhuman. For instance, after the abolition of slavery, the U.S. education system failed to teach Black people about their historical achievements. Across the world, similar programs prohibited native people from exercising their traditional cultures and speaking their own languages. Colonial education taught them to see themselves through Europeans’ eyes instead, creating what writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has called a “cultural bomb” that destroys people’s sense of their own culture and encourages them to consensually accept the racial contract.

The “depersonalizing conceptual apparatus” is a set of ideas and stories that encourages non-white people to see themselves as inferior to white people. By erasing non-white people’s collective histories, languages, and cultures, Europeans disempowered them and discouraged them from resisting the racial contract. This facilitated the economic exploitation of their land and labor, which was always the racial contract’s primary goal. Even today, most students learn history, literature, and philosophy from a European or North American perspective—regardless of where they live.



CHAPTER 3, PART 1: THE RACIAL CONTRACT HISTORICALLY TRACKS THE ACTUAL MORAL/POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF (MOST) WHITE MORAL AGENTS

Moral philosophy generally focuses on formulating ideals for human behavior, while political philosophy focuses on applying those ideals. However, Mills is focusing on actual history, not ideals. This is because he thinks that people can change society more effectively if they recognize “the ugly truth of the past—and present.” Specifically, they must learn why the racial contract succeeded and the raceless social contract failed.

Mills makes an important distinction between ideal theories like the social contract, which try to imagine a perfect society in order to help guide people’s actions, and “naturalized” theories like the racial contract, which try to describe the actual world in order to show people how to improve it. Because an ideal society wouldn’t include racism or white supremacy, theorizing about such a society does not help people eliminate racism or white supremacy in the real world. This is why Mills concludes that non-white people need a “naturalized” theory in order to win equity and justice.



Social contract theory generally presents racism as a random and ultimately unimportant deviation from the norm of human equality. In contrast, the racial contract theory recognizes that racism is the norm, and discrimination isn’t random but rather systematically targets certain groups, as enshrined in law.

Some philosophers may respond to Mills’s argument by saying that the social contract is still a useful ideal for society, and that its benefits just haven’t been fully extended to people of color yet. Mills’s response is that the social contract has always really been a racial contract, even in its earliest and most idealistic versions. In turn, modern societies have all been fundamentally based on racist exclusion. Because the white population’s power and identity are tied to racial oppression, this means that simple reforms will never be enough to create meaningful change.



Understanding real human morality means seeing how a “racialized moral psychology” comes out of the racial contract and convinces white people that they’re acting morally while they’re being racist. This is just like how, despite all their important disagreements, influential male philosophers ranging from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes and Rousseau all agreed that societies should subordinate women. Similarly, all the major philosophers of the social contract—and even many of their opponents—agreed that white people are more civilized and generally superior to non-white people. Moreover, as writers tend to write about the things they care about, their failure to discuss racial inequity and the crimes of European colonialism further shows that they are complicit with the racial contract.

To understand how the racial contract managed to invert morality, Mills looks to cognitive science. For instance, the racial contract builds prejudice into white people’s basic conceptions about race, leading them to view their own superiority as obvious and natural. It also encourages them to define their own well-being by comparing themselves to non-white people, and it blocks them from empathizing with non-white people.

Mills concludes that these “structures of moral cognitive distortion” create a “*Herrenvolk* [master-race] ethics,” in which moral principles apply to white people but not to other groups. This explains why the classic social contract philosophers, like Locke and Kant, claimed to be discussing universal values yet really ended up reserving those values for white people. In fact, this kind of *Herrenvolk* ethics can distort any moral theory in order to preserve white supremacy. People of color have long recognized this.

Mills quotes writers Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, who argued that white people often choose ignorance and self-deception rather than recognizing non-white people’s humanity. The philosopher Lewis Gordon describes this as an example of bad faith, which means deliberately choosing to believe “comfortable falsehoods” over “uncomfortable truths.”

The racial contract influences the way white people treat non-white people, because it convinces them that a different set of moral codes ought to apply to each group. So just as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rousseau thought that subordination was genuinely best for women and people of color, white people often genuinely do not understand how their behavior is racist. This can make it particularly difficult for them to recognize or work against the racial contract.



Mills is only proposing a few hypotheses about racial cognitive distortion: he recognizes that this is a broad topic that could use further study. (Much of his later work focuses on this very idea.) However, his core argument here is that white people tend to be ignorant about racial issues because this allows them to avoid confronting the consequences of white supremacy. By saving their empathy for other white people and explaining inequalities by referencing non-white people’s perceived flaws, white people stay comfortable enough with their privilege that they can avoid taking steps to give it up.



Herrenvolk ethics distorts ordinary race-neutral ethics just as the racial contract distorts the social contract: by limiting its scope to a certain group of people. This allows white people to dodge criticism by talking in universal terms, but without truly universal intent. In other words, Herrenvolk ethics is a strategy for maintaining de facto white supremacy, now that formal white supremacy is no longer viable.



These examples show that Black intellectuals have long recognized and theorized about the way white supremacy fosters ignorance. To overcome this ignorance, white people have to confront “uncomfortable truths” and actively help correct the suffering and inequality that white supremacy has created. This is difficult personally, socially, and politically, but it’s also necessary to build the free, just, and equal society that the Enlightenment supposedly promised.



White supremacist societies distort the truth and choose willful ignorance by denying the horrific atrocities that Europe has committed against the world. In by far the largest genocide in human history, European colonists murdered at least 100 million Native Americans. They enslaved at least 30 million Africans in the Americas, and imperial militaries casually massacred native people throughout the world for centuries to strengthen colonial rule. Soldiers frequently dehumanized their non-white victims by keeping their bones and body parts as war trophies. Public lynchings continued in the U.S. into the 20th century. During wars, Europeans have consistently used more lethal weapons and disproportionate force against non-Europeans. European racism led to the Holocaust, mass murder by American troops in Vietnam, and numerous other horrors. Mills concludes that all these examples show how, under the racial contract, white people's lives are considered far more valuable than non-white people's lives.

The racial contract also explains the Holocaust, which was the culmination of a long historical process of colonization and genocide. But today, many people continue to believe that the Holocaust was totally unique in human history. Mills argues that this shows how the racial contract has successfully made white people forget all the atrocities Europeans committed earlier, outside of Europe. The Holocaust only seems unique in human history to people who value white lives above non-white lives. In fact, even Hitler himself explicitly said that he was following in the footsteps of the Spanish in the New World and the English in India.

Finally, Mills argues that viewing society through the lens of the racial contract is important because it gives white people the opportunity to disavow white supremacy and "speak out and struggle against the terms of the Contract." If they don't, they are consenting to white supremacy. Small numbers of white "race traitors" have always bravely put humanity's collective interests above the white population's specific interests. Mills names a few, such as Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas, philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and white abolitionists and anti-apartheid activists.

Mills's three-page-long catalogue of European and American atrocities might be hard for some readers to swallow, and that's his point: the historical record shows that white supremacy has caused more death, suffering, and destruction than any other political ideology in the history of humankind. It's still the reigning ideology in the contemporary global order, which means people still have to reckon with it. But its magnitude explains why most white people choose to ignore or forget about it whenever they can. Although this makes people feel better, it also prevents them from speaking out or taking action against white supremacy. Therefore, although ignorance is common and understandable, it's also a form of morally reprehensible negligence. It amounts to complicity with both historical and contemporary genocide, slavery, and colonialism. This is because willful ignorance allows white people to continue enjoying the power, wealth, and privilege that they and their ancestors have amassed through the racial contract.



Mills argues that white supremacy is responsible for both the Holocaust itself and the contemporary belief that the Holocaust is unique among world events. To truly do justice to the Holocaust's victims, Mills believes that we must acknowledge that it was part of an ongoing historical pattern that continues today. After all, understanding and learning to recognize this pattern is the best way to stop future genocides. As Hitler himself pointed out, white supremacy is the common thread between the Holocaust and earlier genocides, which were all attempts to enforce the racial contract.



Mills considers it important that his theory allows white people to become "race traitors," because this means he isn't blaming them for things they can't choose (like being born white). In other words, white people are born at the top of a global system of violence and exploitation. Whether they like it or not, their position gives them substantial advantages throughout their lives, but these advantages depend on other people's suffering. However, white people's position of power in the system of global exploitation also gives them significant power to help end that system. But this means that they have to become politically active on behalf of humanity as a whole.



CHAPTER 3, PART 2: THE RACIAL CONTRACT HAS ALWAYS BEEN RECOGNIZED BY NONWHITES AS THE REAL MORAL/POLITICAL AGREEMENT TO BE CHALLENGED

By virtue of their position at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, non-white people tend to clearly see the racial contract's hypocrisy. In particular, they understand that white people freely talk about values and people in the abstract, when they are really only referring to white people. Therefore, in conversations about political theory, people of color tend to pay attention to whether the theory is implicitly limiting personhood to white people. White people see such non-white people as preoccupied with race, but this is because they recognize that conversations about the social contract are really conversations about the racial contract—in which, as non-white people, their own personhood is never guaranteed.

Mills points out that major Black, Indigenous, anti-colonial, and Third World thinkers have generally recognized the basic dimensions of the racial contract: the distinction between persons and subpersons, the “*Herrenvolk* ethics” that prescribes different rules for white and non-white people, and the institutionalized white supremacy of the state. Mills offers a long list of examples from famous thinkers, activists, and political leaders ranging from the Lakota leader Sitting Bull and the Black American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois to the Indian Independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru and the Martinican activists Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. They all realized that society is founded on “racial subordination,” and that political theory is generally written from the perspective of white subordinators.

In response to the racial contract, colonized people tried to form unified racial movements (like Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism). But Europeans were already unified: European writers and philosophers explicitly thought about colonization as a way of clearing the world for white people to settle it. Therefore, they explicitly banded together to protect white supremacy.

In response, non-white peoples banded together around their shared political goal: the fight against imperialism and white supremacy. This split explains why W.E.B. DuBois famously argued that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” It also explains the alliances that non-European nations and peoples formed at occasions like the famous 1955 Bandung Conference.

Non-white people tend to understand the system that oppresses them, because they have to in order to survive. One important aspect of this is understanding that white people often limit their sphere of concern to other white people without even realizing it. In other words, white supremacy—or putting one's whiteness before one's humanity—is an automatic reflex for many white people. For some, “people” implicitly means “white people.”



Mills cites a long list of prominent thinkers in order to underline his point that people of color generally recognize the workings of the racial contract because of how it affects them. He also hopes to remind his readers that the global fight against the racial contract has been going on for many generations. Non-white people have developed their own political theories as part of this fight, and Mills makes it clear that his own theory of the racial contract is part of this tradition.



Colonized people's unified movements show that they clearly understood how white supremacy created a kind of global European alliance (and perhaps rivalry, as well) among colonial countries. This shows that white supremacy was emerging as a global political system and could only be countered by similarly powerful global alliances.



“The problem of the color line” persists today, in the form of the great divide between majority-white and majority-non-white countries that Mills discussed in his first chapter. However, it's not clear how non-white people and nations plan to challenge the global alliance of white supremacy today, several decades after formal decolonization.



Today, this idea of a fight against imperialism and white supremacy seems outdated to most people. Mills argues that this is because the racial contract has made white supremacy, and its long history, largely invisible. Contemporary philosophers have contributed to this cover-up by insisting on talking about society in terms of “abstract and general categories that originally were restricted to white citizens.” And because these philosophers were stuck in these abstract terms and don’t recognize the racial contract, they can’t understand the depth and diversity of non-white philosophers’ thought.

For non-white people, who are considered subhuman under the racial contract, the first step in politics has to be claiming personhood. This starts with an “internal battle” against their own internalized sense of inferiority. After finding self-respect, non-white people next have to reclaim epistemic power over themselves, or learn to think about society and history outside conventional Eurocentric frameworks of thinking. This often includes writing “vindicationist” histories to correct white historians’ misrepresentations. Finally, to resist the racial contract’s beauty standards, non-white people have to assert their own. This is what makes slogans like “Black is beautiful!” politically significant.

Mills attributes the decline of anti-imperialism to the new phase of informal white supremacy that formed in the mid-20th century. Because both philosophy and politics are stuck using “abstract and general categories,” they portray the world as equal, while forgetting to address the cumulative inequalities created by 500 years of formal white supremacy. Now, identifying white supremacy as a global political system is much harder than in the past, when European colonialism made it obvious. However, Mills’s theory of the racial contract is an attempt to make this system visible again.



Mills follows in the footsteps of numerous anti-racist scholars before him by giving his readers a roadmap toward liberation. This is a long and difficult process for people of color, who have to unlearn white supremacy’s distorted worldview. Then, they have to learn to see the world in a totally new way if they want to reclaim their humanity. But by winning the “internal battle” for self-respect, people of color can identify the racial contract and reject the myth of the social contract, which falsely suggests that the state is built on citizens’ legitimate consent.



CHAPTER 3, PART 3: THE “RACIAL CONTRACT” AS A THEORY IS EXPLANATORILY SUPERIOR TO THE RACELESS SOCIAL CONTRACT IN ACCOUNTING FOR THE POLITICAL AND MORAL REALITIES OF THE WORLD AND IN HELPING TO GUIDE NORMATIVE THEORY

Mills argues that political theorists should replace the social contract with the racial contract, which paints a more accurate picture of the world. This means that it can better show how to improve the world, which Mills argues is the real purpose of political philosophy. Even when mainstream theorists insist that their view is purely theoretical and objective, it’s still implicitly based on a whitewashed vision of the world, in which racism, colonialism, and slavery are insignificant. In contrast, the racial contract theory accurately sees this history. It shows how the social contract’s race-blindness is actually a part of white supremacy.

As philosophers throughout history have known, people’s social position affects the ideas they pursue and the theories they develop. This is why philosophers often examine their predecessors’ social biases to understand where they went wrong. Similarly, Marxist and feminist theorists have shown how social hierarchy distorts people’s thinking, which in turn prevents them from seeing the hierarchy around them in the first place.

Whereas social contract theorists claim objectivity, Mills points out that no philosophical theory is totally objective: that’s why there’s disagreement in philosophy. All philosophy is written from some perspective, and white scholars claiming to be objective fail to see that their perspective depends on their specific circumstances. Rather than choosing a theory based on objectivity, Mills instead bases his theory on what is most politically useful for contemporary people. As he has shown that white supremacy is a dominant global political system, it’s only logical that he proposes a racial contract theory that adequately explains it.



Mills again shows how his critique of mainstream philosophy and his critique of the racial contract work together: philosophers tend to be blind to the way their social position influences their work, because the racial contract generally prevents white people from adequately understanding the political and economic structure of the world. By demystifying this structure, the racial contract theory can hopefully show philosophers what they have been missing.



In this vein, Mills thinks that white people fail to understand their privilege *because of that privilege*. Therefore, they tend not to understand the main political issues that are urgently important to the majority of the world's population. This explains why white philosophers almost entirely ignore abolitionist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and Indigenous thinkers. This would require them to first recognize that white supremacy is a global political system worth challenging.

Next, Mills argues that the racial contract theory is useful because it shows that race is both a powerful political force and a social construction. This provides an alternative to the assumption that race is either doesn't exist or is a biological essence that people can't help. Instead of labeling white people as evil, Mills's theory gives them the choice to either denounce or perpetuate political white supremacy.

The racial contract theory also shows that European racism is the product of a particular history, but the world could look very different under different circumstances. For instance, Japan challenged white supremacy in the 20th century, as Japanese imperialism was also based on an ideology of racial supremacy. While the white racial contract has been the most powerful, it hasn't been the only one.

Next, Mills clarifies that he's not a postmodernist or deconstructionist. Instead, he considers himself "pro-Enlightenment" and "antipostmodernist." His problem isn't contract theories, but rather the way white people have restricted such theories to themselves. In short, Mills is looking at the real world, comparing it to ideals of equality and justice that it hasn't realized, and theorizing in order to help achieve those ideals. Meanwhile, the social contract uses illusions and abstractions to distract people from the real world. Mills isn't against all abstraction, just "abstract[ing] away from the things that matter," meaning the things that actually determine the way society functions.

Mills believes that white academics fail to understand non-white people's important contributions to philosophy, and they also fail to recognize the full extent of white supremacy. In other words, they remain stuck in social contract theory, in which it's possible to talk about a fair and just society without talking about race, because people of color simply do not enter the equation.



Mills offers his theory as a middle ground between two popular positions that often come up in popular conversations about racism. On one hand, many anti-racists see that racism has powerful impacts on society, so they assume that race must represent some significant truth about people's inner identities. Ironically, just like white supremacists, they end up believing that race is a biological essence. On the other hand, many others assume that, because race is merely a social construct with little to no biological basis, it cannot be as powerful as it really is. Mills's view takes the advantages of both these interpretations by showing that race is a social construct and has powerful effects.



Again, Mills emphasizes that he doesn't think anything is inherently wrong with white people: their power and privilege is the cumulative result of history, not of anything distinctive about them. Racism largely depends on the idea that inherent racial differences exist, but Mills doesn't believe that they do.



It may seem strange that Mills considers himself "pro-Enlightenment," given that he spends much of the book criticizing Enlightenment philosophers. His point is that the racial contract is really what prevents society from achieving these philosophers' stated values (like freedom, equality, and justice). Therefore, Mills agrees with the Enlightenment's stated values—he just doesn't think Enlightenment philosophers actually wanted to extend them to all human beings. Furthermore, he believes that these philosophers' theories actually make those values harder to achieve by covering up the truth.



Lastly, Mills contextualizes his work in the “long, honorable tradition of oppositional black theory,” through which Black people have reclaimed their ability to theorize in a society that treats them as subpersons who are incapable of free thought. Black theorists often had to educate themselves and work outside of white universities. They have long seen how white supremacy maintains power and privilege for white people through domination and exclusion. The racial contract threatens this power and privilege by theorizing in the same way as white thinkers. Thus, it can connect Black thought to mainstream white thought, and mainstream white thought to reality. Meanwhile, global inequalities continue to deepen, and ending them remains an urgent concern. Many people pretend they don’t exist, and the racial contract thrives on their ignorance.

Given his continual emphasis on the history of white supremacy and non-white people’s resistance to the racial contract, it only makes sense that Mills closes his book by paying homage to the “long, honorable tradition” that has influenced him. In addition to acknowledging his sources and helping guide his readers to important works of Black philosophy, this nod to history is Mills’s way to counteract some philosophers’ tendency to treat philosophical questions and ideas as though they were timeless and unchanging. In reality, ideas are marked by the people, places, and time periods that produce them. This is why Mills proposes the racial contract as a useful idea for the present era of informal white supremacy and growing global inequality.





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