American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 60, #4, October 2023

Race and Class Together

Lawrence Blum

Abstract

The dispute about the role of class in understanding the life situations of people of color has tended to be overpolarized, between a class reductionism and an "it's only race" position.

Class processes shape racial groups' life situations. Race and class are also distinct axes of injustice; but class injustice informs racial injustice. Some aspects of racial injustice can be expressed only in concepts associated with class (e.g., material deprivation, inferior education). But other aspects of racial injustice or other harms, such as racial discrimination or stigma, are not reducible to class concepts and cannot be fully addressed through class-focused policies. Overall, any attempt to fully secure racial justice for a racial group will require a combination of race-focused and class-focused policies.

Anti-racist outlooks often neglect or downplay either the normative or the explanatory significance of class, or both—for example, by overlooking or downplaying the dignitary harms of class and the material harms of race; missing the historical dimension of class injustice; masking class by a narrowing of the complex normative structure of racial disparities; or not recognizing that a class-focused initiative (like raising the minimum wage) can address substantial racial justice concerns, even though not all of them. "Systemic racism" terminology recognizes class explanatorily but suppresses it normatively.

Charles Mills's influential notion of "white supremacy," while a powerful tool for conceptualizing and illuminating racial injustice, can also contribute to minimizing or masking the justice-related impact of class, as do some of Mills's specific discussions of class in various writings.

Key Words: race; class; white supremacy; Charles Mills; racial disparities; class injustice; systemic racism.

I will argue that securing justice for Blacks, Indigenous peoples, and Latinxs (in the US) requires attending to class. Class processes shape such racial groups' life situations. Some members of these groups share class-based and justice-relevant interests with (some) members of other racial groups, including whites, and do not share them with other members of their own group. Addressing these interests through class-focused policies is often the best way to secure justice for disadvantaged racial groups, and the justice in question is simultaneously of a class and a race character.

In addition, race and class are normatively distinct axes of injustice. Some aspects of racial injustice, however, can only be expressed by means of concepts associated with class (e.g., a group not being provided with adequate education or financial resources). But other aspects of racial injustice or other harms, such as racial discrimination, prejudice, or stigmatizing, are irreducible to class concepts and cannot be fully addressed through class-focused policies. Overall, any attempt to fully secure racial justice for a racial group will require a combination of race-focused and class-focused policies.

Anti-racist outlooks often neglect or downplay the normative or explanatory significance of class. I will examine reasons for this.[1] I will also argue that Charles Mills's influential notion of "white supremacy," while a powerful tool for conceptualizing and illuminating racial injustice, can also contribute to minimizing or masking the justice-related impact of class.

More generally, philosophers have tended to focus on either class or race, but have not tried to bring the two together in the same explanatory and normative fields.[2] I attempt to do that here.

1. Mills on White Supremacy

Mills sees "white supremacy" as a global socio-economic-political system that unjustly benefits whites over people of color. He regards that terminology as capturing a systematicity absent in "racism" or "white privilege."[3] He sometimes adds that white supremacy also involves the system's being "run by white people for white benefit."[4] If this means that the rulers of the system directly aim to benefit whites as whites, that does not seem to capture how ruling elites of the Western world actually operate. Even only the white members of that ruling group may aim to protect the interests of powerful economic actors, but do not generally do so with regard to their whiteness but rather their economic, or national, location. If Mills takes the more minimal view that white supremacy refers to a system in which white people do in fact disproportionately benefit, that is closer in spirit to his desire to emphasize the systematic operation of manifold processes (including those not intentionally aimed at sustaining white benefit) that do sustain overall disproportionate and illicit white benefit. I will therefore regard this more minimal construal as his understanding of "white supremacy."

2. Class is Often Essential to Explaining Race-Based Disparities

In his essay "Racial Exploitation," Mills develops the idea of racial exploitation as a component of the white supremacy system. The details of that account are not relevant to my argument, but in the following passage, Mills provides a brief account of how different processes interact together in a cumulative fashion to disadvantage Blacks over time (specifically in the US context):

> The different forms of exploitation interact with one another, exacerbating the situation. For example, blacks receive inferior education, thereby losing an equal opportunity to build human capital, thereby losing out in competition with white candidates, thereby having to take inferior jobs, thereby having less money, thereby being disadvantaged in dealings with banks that are already following patterns of mortgage discrimination, thereby being forced to live in inferior neighborhoods, thereby having homes of lesser value, thereby providing a lower tax base for schooling, thereby being unable to pass on to their children advantages comparable to whites, and so on.[5]

The passage highlights a complex racially unjust, inequality-producing process. But the specific racial inequities resulting from it depend on class-based processes, or processes connected to a capitalist market system, as background conditions. Mills does not mention these. Here are two examples:

(1) Disparities come in degrees, and these are normatively relevant. If whites have a 3% advantage over Blacks in income, that is of less normative or justice-based concern than a 30% advantage.

And the degree of racial disparities in education, housing, and wealth creation—those mentioned in Mills's quote—is shaped not only by racially discriminatory practices, but in

addition by the overall level of economic disparity between income- or wealth-defined groups. Envision a society in which the top decile contains twenty million people, eighteen million of whom are white, one million Black, and one million Latinx, and the bottom decile contains twenty million people of whom ten million are white, five million Black, and five million Latinx.

Now imagine two different scenarios regarding the mean wealth gap between the top and bottom deciles. In A, the mean gap is five to one; in B, ten to one. B also involves a greater racial disparity than A because it increases the distance between the 90% of whites in the top decile and the 50% of Blacks and Latinxs in the bottom one. (It does so overall even though 10% of Blacks and Latinxs [in the top decile] are further advantaged over the white 50% of the bottom decile.) So the degree of racial disparity is affected by whatever processes (economic, policy) shape the overall economic hierarchy itself, not only by distinctly race-based discrimination.

(2) The housing processes mentioned ("[blacks] dealing with banks that are already following patterns of mortgage discrimination, thereby being forced to live in inferior neighborhoods, thereby having homes of lesser value") presuppose a system of almost entirely privately provided housing, subject to market forces and the profit-seeking actions of private actors such as banks, developers, and real estate agents. The valuing of homes is responsive to white people's discriminatory sentiments about living in racially mixed neighborhoods. But the market structure helps create the operative "home values" at play. In doing so, it provides incentives for banks to discriminate in lending, and real estate agents to steer prospective clients in discriminatory ways. This does not excuse those private agents, but racially discriminatory behavior leading to racially disparate housing outcomes takes place in a particular socioeconomic context, that is a crucial part of the overall explanation of the specific disparities resulting from the discriminatory actions.[6]

Were more housing to be provided outside the market system, as a right, or something like a right (in either rental or ownership form), the racial discrimination mentioned by Mills could lose some of the terrain in which it currently operates; and the degree of racial housing disparity, and therefore housing injustice, would be diminished.[7]

There are few race-related phenomena in US society that can be understood entirely separate from a class perspective broadly construed. So class must figure into an explanation of the normatively significant life situations of racial groups.

Mills's understanding of white supremacy could incorporate this explanatory point, that class processes are contributing to white supremacist structures. But he does not explicitly make this point, as far as I am aware; and his quote above (p. 2) does not name the class or market dimensions of the racial processes he mentions.

3. Sharing Interests, Class and Other

The explanatory significance of class in racial groups' life situations has a normative counterpart—that members of disadvantaged racial groups share justice-related, class-based interests with members of other racial groups, and whites in particular. Consider a front-line health worker in the Covid period. Such workers were often inadequately protected against illness and death. An individual Latinx health worker shared that vulnerability with a white worker, that gave them a reason to make common cause to secure personal protective equipment, or to support a union drive that would improve their working conditions.

This shared justice-related interest (in having a healthy workplace) across that racial divide is an everyday phenomenon. Members of racial groups have human interests unrelated to their race, as members of gender-defined groups have interests unrelated to their gender. Some of

these shared interests have a class-based character, and it is these I am focusing on. But some shared interests are not related to class, or indeed to any specific social location or identity. For example, an interest in not being killed is a general human interest cutting across all such identities.

Though entirely commonplace, shared human interests, as well as shared class interests, across the racial divide deserve attention, for two reasons. First, racial ideology promotes the idea that persons of different races are fundamentally different in character, discouraging an experienced sense of common humanity and common interests. Everyone knows humans share some fundamental, and not-so-fundamental, interests. But a salient racial lens, even if otherwise entirely appropriate from a justice perspective, can block the experience or recognition of this commonality.

Second, regarding class, employers and the employer class have often attempted to exploit this racial ideology in order to discourage their multiracial workforces from uniting around their shared class interests, especially in union campaigns. For example, Amazon tried to discourage an ultimately successful union drive in one of its warehouses in spring 2022 by invoking anti-black stereotypes to attempt to discredit the main organizer of the drive.[8]

Because this racist ideology is used to sow distrust and division, there is a distinct civic value in members of different races, who share the same class/occupational position, experiencing their shared interests and acting on them—apart from the justice enhancement the workers gain from that concerted action. Such action expresses interracial cooperation, an important civic value in a multiracial democracy.

Despite shared class interests in a given workplace or employment sector, the workers' overall experiences may differ by race, both in a specific workplace and more generally. The health workers of color might experience racial harassment, microaggressions or other discriminatory treatment not experienced by the white workers, and their health might be more at risk from Covid because of a greater incidence of underlying health problems.[9] While appealing to shared class interests, unions can also give attention to these race-related injustices, for example by bargaining for strong anti-discrimination policies in the workplace. More generally, in order to fully address racial justice concerns, class-based organizing must incorporate attention to race.[10]

Often in current thinking about race and class, emphasizing the significance of class is regarded as thereby demoting that of race, and emphasizing the importance of race is regarded as demoting that of class. I am pushing back against both aspects of that thinking.

3.1. Can White People be Harmed by White Supremacy?

The justice-relevant interests members of a racial group share due to their class position will not be shared with members of their own racial group who do not share their class position. So, in particular situations working class Latinxs or Blacks might gain more, from an overall justice perspective, from a class-focused initiative such as unionization than from a race-focused one such as an anti-discrimination policy (not that one would normally have to choose between them).

This importance of class differences in defining the overall interests of members of racial groups holds for US whites as well, and entails that not all white people necessarily benefit in an overall way from white supremacy, in its particular form in their society. For example, whites situated similarly to people of color might fail to recognize their common interests, and, consequently, take action that harms their interests. They might vote for a candidate who favors a

smaller role for government and a consequently weaker safety net, because they associate "government," or government assistance, with Blacks, or racial minorities more generally, and wish to distance themselves from it for that reason. Poor and working class whites might end up being worse off in their current society with its particular form of white supremacy, because in these ways, and others, white supremacy inhibits a stronger social democratic socio-economic order.[11]

Mills's view of white supremacy theoretically provides for this possibility in that he allows for multiple domination systems in a given society, so (some) whites advantaged in the white supremacy system might be disadvantaged in the class system. In one place, Mills comes close to making this point more explicitly. "The claim that racial exploitation exists does not commit one to the claim that its benefits are all necessarily distributed equally."[12] This could mean either that the benefit variability is totally random, or that it is the product of the specific interaction of other domination systems (class, gender) with white supremacy. If the latter it might be misleading of Mills to say that white people secure different degrees of advantage from white supremacy itself, rather than from the overall social order with its multiple overlapping domination systems. In any case, if some whites benefit only a small degree from white supremacy, it is a short step to their class-based interests being better served in a social order without the white supremacy.

Mills also mentions the racial wealth gap, to which increasing attention has been paid as an empirically and morally significant form of racial disparity. He cites Black Wealth/White Wealth, the book most responsible for this development: "Whites in general, but well-off whites in particular, were able to amass assets and use their secure economic status to pass their wealth from generation to generation."[13] But working class and poor (and, indeed, many middle-class) whites are not "able to amass assets" nor have "secure economic status" that they pass on to the next generation. So the statement does not really apply to "whites in general," and perhaps fails to take sufficiently seriously Mills's own point about unequal benefit to whites.[14]

3.1.1 White Supremacy and Intersectionality

That not all whites benefit from white supremacy illustrates the "intersectionality" idea that people of color have other identities (gender, class, sexual orientation) on the basis of which they can be advantaged or disadvantaged, while being disadvantaged in the racial domination system. Just as black women can be disadvantaged by being both Black and women, poor whites can be disadvantaged because of their class but advantaged because of their race.

The intersectionality idea of multiple advantages/disadvantages does not necessarily involve being able to compare and total up the advantages and disadvantages in the different domination systems into an assessment of overall advantage and disadvantage. And there may well be harms and benefits of different types that cannot be measured against one another (for example, higher pay vs. social stigma). But in his quote (p. 7) Mills is referring to advantages and disadvantages from different domination systems that can be thus compared. I am taking his point further to suggest that at least in some respects poorer and working class whites might be harmed by a white supremacist system.

4. Reasons Class Factors are Often Overlooked or Diminished by Those Committed to Racial Justice

I want now to examine in more detail the nature of the resistance among some anti-racists

(but also Americans in general) to fully acknowledging class both as a distinct axis of injustice and as part of the explanation of the life situations of racial groups. I will group these resistances into four categories—(A) denying class injustice, (B) mischaracterizing class injustice, (C) implying an exclusive choice between race and class rather than recognizing the possibility of both, (D) masking class injustice.

In this discussion, I proceed on the assumption that class is indeed a significant axis of injustice, particularly in the US today. This assumption will provide the starting point for a typology of obstacles to an appreciation of class injustice.

Class injustice takes diverse forms. Without attempting to provide an overall account, or to establish that class injustice exists, here are some plausible examples of that diversity within "class injustice" (some of these items partly overlap with others)—(1) some people do not have access to a basic minimum of certain fundamental human goods (shelter, food, education); (2) unequal economic holdings provide unequal access to social goods such as health and education above that minimum[15]; (3) the gap between different income- or wealth-defined groups is too great;[16] (4) class-defined groups remain in a subordinate position over historical time; (5) unequal family resources undermine equality of opportunity of the next generation to attain valued social positions; (6) occupations are compensated at wildly different rates (for example, hedge fund manager and elementary school teacher), not justified by their social value or the abilities and effort involved in carrying out those jobs.

4.1 (A) Denying Class Injustice

The view that class inequities in the US social order are not unjust is expressed in a variety of culturally familiar tropes, views, and ideologies. Perhaps the most salient is the ideology of meritocracy, which claims that existing disparities in rewards for different occupations are actually just because they reflect differences in the contributions, effort, and abilities of different economic agents. Both those in poverty and millionaires deserve the rewards they receive. A second view, more libertarian, of the reward system as just is that market agents act freely when they engage in market transactions (for example, agreeing to work for an employer), and justice consists in these free transactions, rendering their outcomes also just. A third view, not that the reward system is positively just but that it is <u>not unjust</u>, is that the type of market capitalist society we have in the US provides for the general welfare better than any alternative and its market operations and outcomes are neither just nor unjust.

The acceptance among the US population of any of these views is a barrier to public acknowledgment of class as an important axis of injustice. However, clearly there has also been a much broader public <u>rejection</u> of all these views in the past, say, fifteen years than in the thirty years prior to that, with the widespread disenchantment with the neoliberal world order in the wake of the 2008 financial recession, and a widespread sense across the political spectrum that the vast inequities of our economic system are not justifiable.

4.2 (B) Mischaracterizing Class Injustice

A second type of obstacle to acknowledging class injustice in its own right, and as a contributor to racial injustice, is a mischaracterization of class or its forms of harm as being of an entirely different character than those connected with race. On this view, class concerns only material matters while race (also) involves deeper issues of stigma, social valuing, and civic standing.

Mills provides a version of this view. He says that the classic ideology of white

supremacy in the slavery and colonial eras cast people of color as "subpersons." And this feature differentiates white supremacy from class as forms of domination, class having allegedly no comparable attack on the dignity of the disadvantaged group.[17]

This view is misleading in several ways. First, some versions of it imply that racial injustice has nothing to do with "material goods," associated with class, such as income, wealth, housing, occupation, and education.[18] But disparities between whites and Blacks, Indigenous peoples, or Latinxs with respect to such (class-linked) goods are a core element of virtually all familiar conceptions of racial injustice. If we did not assume the value of these goods, we would jettison a central underpinning of our familiar concepts of racial justice.

The objection also misrepresents the "material" harms/goods. They not only involve "having stuff"—or only money—but concern fundamental human needs, such as nourishment, health, shelter, and education. So the deprivation of these goods is not rightly seen as superficial, or "materialistic," in an alleged contrast with more substantial racial harms and injustices.

Further, class goes beyond these goods to involve social value/self-worth goods and harms, as does race. These harms are partly bound up with the ideology of meritocracy mentioned earlier. Working class and poor people of any race are cast as "unsuccessful" in the meritocratic view—their lesser economic position taken as reflecting their lesser abilities, effort, and contribution—generating social attitudes of contempt and devaluing toward them. Or they can feel shame for not providing their families, or themselves, with a better life. A sense of comparative inadequacy can afflict the "unsuccessful."[19]

So both class and race involve casting some group(s), already disadvantaged, as also inferior or inadequate, a dignitary injury on top of the material ones.[20] The epithet "white trash" explicitly expresses that class-based stigma of inferiority, incorporating a racial significance as well (and thus showing that the white dominance involved in the white supremacy system does not shield all whites from social disvaluing)[21].

The stigma in question may be more socially powerful in the race than the class case. Historically it was publicly articulated as a rationale for domination and subordination of Blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Indigenous peoples, a development without exact parallel in the class case. Nevertheless, both race and class do involve both dignitary and material harms/goods, so there is no categorial difference in these respects, as the argument claims, only (at most) a difference of degree. This is in no way to deny that, for example, poor whites especially in the South in the Segregation era were offered a sense of dignitary superiority over Blacks (which DuBois called a "psychological wage," thus invoking a sense of compensation for the actual low wages they were paid)—even though the contempt with which they were actually held by the white ruling class was comparable to the latter's view of Blacks.

4.2.1 Mills on Sub-Personhood and Class

Mills's particular view of a contrast between class domination and white supremacy—that the latter involves an ideology of subpersonhood with nothing comparable regarding the former—has two problems. First, he says the current form of white supremacy is no longer premised on people of color being stigmatized as subpersons as they were in the slavery and colonialism eras. "Here [i.e., currently] the inequity does not arise from R2s still being stigmatized as of inferior status, or at least such stigmatization is not essential to the process. White supremacy is no longer overt, and the statuses of R1s and R2s have been formally equalized (for example through legislative change)."[22] But if the social devaluing characteristic of the subperson ideology is no longer a defining criterion for white supremacy, we seem left

with only the structure of unjust material disadvantage suffered by R2s and unjust advantages enjoyed by R1s. This seems to jettison the contrast with class domination, since that is also a structure of unjust advantage and disadvantage.

This form of white supremacy is certainly a legacy of the earlier subperson form, as the prior attribution of subpersonhood helped shape and rationalize the structures of inequity that resulted in material disparities in income, health, wealth, education, and occupation in the present. But such current racial injustices do not seem different in their own character from class-based disadvantages and injustices, and so do not provide support for the radical qualitative differences between race and class harms that the argument requires.

A second problem is that Mills understates and possibly mischaracterizes the class injustice that he contrasts with racial injustice/white supremacy.

In a modern class society . . . people compete on the market, some do worse than others, and the children of the latter grow up in homes and neighborhoods where family resources are thinner and the schools are worse. Presuming the competition was fair by capitalist norms, children will be disadvantaged in escaping their parents' status, but not barred. But a racist society where through discrimination, segregation, etc., poor black kids do not get an equal chance does violate capitalist market norms.[23]

The aspect of class-based injustice Mills is focusing on involves the next generation's class-based disadvantages. He recognizes that working class offspring are disadvantaged in their ability to advance beyond their parents' socio-economic situation, but are not "barred" from doing so, which he implies that, because of discrimination and segregation, Black working class offspring are. But Black working class students are no longer "barred" from advancement, as they were under Segregation. Like working class whites, they are just disadvantaged in their ability to advance (probably to a greater degree on average).

Moreover, by characterizing the racial group in question as "poor blacks," Mills imports a class dimension that undermines the purported comparison between race and class. Middle-class Blacks are not as disadvantaged as poor Blacks, and are in many ways advantaged compared to poor and working class whites.[24] Also he does not use "poor" to designate the white comparison group, being disadvantaged in a market society, further weakening the comparative point he wants to make.

Finally, elsewhere, Mills also underplays the vast inequalities between the working class and the privileged classes in the current US form of capitalism, in part because he sometimes focuses on the workplace as if it were the only site of class injustice. "[A]nother crucial difference between class and racial exploitation is that the latter takes place much more broadly than at the point of production."[25] But class inequalities permeate every facet of capitalist society—overall material well-being, housing, health, access to education—not only the workplace, as racial inequalities also do.

So both race and class involve both material and dignitary harms or injustices (though not necessarily to the same degree).[26]

4.2.2 Race, Class, and History

A second way class has been mischaracterized in its comparison with race concerns history. Mills and others see history as at the center of racial justice, in that racial justice is not simply a disparity in present holdings among racial groups but involves a legacy from the past into the present, of unrectified historical oppression and subordination based on race. By contrast, class injustice is taken as an issue purely of current patterns of economic disparity, for

example, that the top 1% in the wealth hierarchy holds more wealth than the bottom 90%, or that CEOs in 2021 made 351 times the average worker in their firms, compared to 61 times in 1989.[27] Mills's version of this view focuses on Rawls's conception of justice as a set of principles governing the distribution of various social goods in the present, making no essential reference to previous injustice.

This contrast misrepresents the role of history in class injustice. Class injustice also has a historical dimension, along with its non-historical dimensions (see above, p. 8f). Class-defined groups can be conceptualized in several different ways, not only as all persons possessing a class-linked characteristic at a given point in time, but also as an historical, intergenerational grouping. Well-off people independent of race provide their progeny with the advantages of wealth, education, and occupation that they themselves possess. Disadvantaged people's offspring inherit their disadvantages.

Of course, some children of the wealthy end up falling into a lower tier; some disadvantaged children rise to a higher one. Nevertheless, in very unequal societies the group-based inheriting of advantage and disadvantage holds for the most part, perpetuating an intergenerational grouping. Analogously to race-based groups, a set of family lines roughly sharing a class characteristic over a stretch of historical time remains in a subordinate position in an ongoing hierarchical structure.[28]

The historical dimension of racial injustice is often linked to the "ideal/non-ideal" distinction, in which a "presentist" focus is understood as an attempt to work out what justice would look like in perfect form, while the historical focus is concerned with the rectification of previous injustice. But I am not limiting my presentist focus to that "ideal" project but am including forms of present injustice of several types. In that broader understanding, racial justice is not confined to rectifying historical injustice, but includes preventing current forms of, for example, racial discrimination, racial prejudice, and racial stigmatizing. On that understanding, racial justice encompasses both present and historical aspects, as class justice also does.

When class and race injustice are properly characterized, they are more alike than the two mischaracterizations we have considered. Both involve both material and dignitary/recognitional harms and injustices. Both involve both historical and presentist forms of harm and injustice.

This discussion bears on the debate concerning reparations, that I can mention only briefly. Mills says it is a "category mistake" to think that present-focused justice initiatives could possibly realize racial justice, since racial justice must have a historical, reparative character. He criticizes Shelby's use of Rawls's conception of justice to try to address racial injustice on these grounds.[29]

But if class also has a historical dimension, and race also has a presentist one, then class-focused policies might address some (though only some) of the justice concerns a race-focused reparations program also aims to. For example, the provision of a decent home as a right addresses a historical disadvantage of poor people of any race in their (partly inherited) impaired ability to access decent housing, but could also be seen as addressing a present racial injustice.

4.3 (C) False Exclusive Choice Between Race and Class

A different barrier to an appreciation of class in the context of race stems from presenting a false exclusive choice between purely race-focused and purely class-focused policies. For example, Ta-Nehisi Coates criticizes standard social democratic class-focused measures like Medicare for All (free government funded health care for all citizens) or the Child Tax Credit for low-income families, for failing to address the distinctly racial aspect of Black disadvantage.[30]

But he conflates whether the social democratic initiatives address substantial justice-related interests of Blacks with whether they address all such interests. I am arguing that class-focused policies do the former but cannot do the latter, but that failure does not detract from the former's (racial) justice-serving character. The same could be said of race-focused initiatives (e.g. affirmative action, anti-discrimination) that do not address Blacks' class-based disadvantages. They can address some, but not all, unjust racial disadvantage, but are not to be shunned for that reason.

4.4 (D) Masking Class injustice

4.4.1 Disparities

Another barrier operates by masking class's presence, rather than by denying or mischaracterizing it. The way racial disparities are often presented and understood exemplifies this. Take, for example, Blacks being killed by police at a higher rate than whites, or having worse health than whites. Often it is assumed that the reason to be concerned about the plight of the group on the disadvantaged end of a disparity (in this case, Blacks) is that this group is being treated unequally because of their race.

But if unequal treatment were the only wrong, it could be rectified by reducing the quality of whites' health care to Blacks' current level, and by increasing the unjustifiable killing of whites to the same level as Blacks. If the gap itself were the only concern, there would be no reason to prefer "levelling down" to "levelling up." Clearly this would be a morally absurd way to approach the situation, because the wrong of police killing Black people is not only that they kill proportionately more Black people than white people. It is that they kill anyone, of any race, unjustifiably.[31]

Racial disparities regarding distinctly class-related matters are sometimes stated almost as if the racial disparity were the only form of injustice involved in the situation at hand, so the class dimension of the injustice is masked or inappropriately de-emphasized. Here is an example of this, from Heather McGhee's The Sum of Us: "According to an analysis conducted by the US Department of Justice of 2.5 million mortgage loans made from 2004 to 2008 by Countrywide [a mortgage lending company] black customers were at least twice as likely as similarly qualified whites to be steered into subprime loans."[32]

The main thrust of McGhee's book is that while racial minorities experience a greater degree of these class-related injustices than do whites, whites also experience them, and the racism involved in producing the disparities is ultimately harmful to whites also. But the quote itself, and the discussion surrounding it in the book, implicitly demotes the injustice to whites, while also conflating the damage to blacks from being wrongly steered to subprime mortgages (a class-related injustice, shared with whites) with the wrong of being treated worse than whites. So disparity thinking can contribute to masking class injustice suffered by both whites and non-whites.[33]

Disparities can capture a specifically racial injury by pointing to an injustice beyond being given inadequate health care, being killed without justification, or being steered to subprime mortgages—that of being denied equal treatment on account of race. This form of wrongfulness can be recognized only by comparing the incidence of the injury in question among different groups. But that injury morally piggybacks on a non-racial harm (class-related in the case of inferior health, non-class-related in case of being killed) visited upon a racial group.[34]

So disparity thinking can (but by no means necessarily does) blind us to compelling

wrongs suffered by racial minority groups and by whites, including but not limited to those of a class-related nature.[35]

4.4.2 "Systemic Racism"

In recent years, "systemic racism" has come almost to replace "racism" as the most common public term to mark wrongfulness in the racial arena. The shift is valuable in making clear that racial wrongfulness often involves larger patterns, structures, and institutions, not always caused by individual wrongful behavior. But, similar to the disparity framing, "systemic racism" can also serve to mask or demote class-based injustice.

A particularly salient use of the "systemic racism" label was applied to the intensified and disproportionate vulnerability of Black and Latinx frontline and especially health workers during the Covid era. It was widely recognized that this racial impact and injustice was a product both of a "class" process (greater exposure to illness due to the character of the job) operating on persons who occupied vulnerable jobs, and a racial history that consigned a disproportionate share of Black and Latinx workers to those occupations in the first place.

While "systemic racism" in this sense acknowledges the causal or explanatory role of class in racial injustice, the locution sidelines its normative aspect. Like the point made above about disparities, it masks (without denying) the fact that the covid-related injustice befalls all workers, including whites, who occupy the given occupational position, linguistically highlighting only the specifically racial wrongfulness of the overall process involved in harming the health workers.[36]

4.4.3 "Racial Injustice"

"Racial injustice" does not have a unitary meaning, and, like class injustice, can plausibly be thought to encompass a range of wrongs. But some strands of thinking regarding "racial injustice" specifically exclude class considerations. One, familiar in disparities contexts, holds class constant while looking at racial disparities with regard to some social good or harm (health, education). For example, in one study, holding mothers' education levels constant, Black babies were found to have lower birthweight than white ones (with the gap higher at higher levels of education).[37] This framing can yield valuable information, but as a measure or form of racial justice it fails to take account of the fact that Blacks, Latinxs, and Indigenous peoples are disproportionately concentrated in lower income levels, a legacy of historical oppression.

A second approach to "racial injustice" sees this very disproportion as the principal type of injustice, and takes racial justice to consist in an equal proportion of every racial group occupying every level of the income/occupation hierarchy, holding that hierarchy constant. So, 12% of blacks in the top 10% (of income or wealth, or comparable measure) and (only) 12% of Blacks in the bottom decile would, on this approach, constitute a situation of "racial justice."

I have not seen this conception of racial justice/injustice explicitly spelled out and advocated for, but some version of it seems implicit in many discussions of racial justice. Something approaching it is also implied in educational affirmative action, where the class-based character of the higher education system (that the highest ranked institutions are very disproportionately populated by wealthier students, the lower rungs by working class and poor students) is not questioned, but something closer (than currently) to an equal percentage of people of color at each tier is promoted.

A conception of racial justice that leaves in place the staggering class inequities of our current socioeconomic order may or may not be an intellectually coherent one. But it contributes

to masking (or possibly denying) class injustice. Whether such a conception of racial justice is a morally viable one is an issue for another day.[38]

University of Massachusetts, Boston
100 William T. Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125-3393
Lawrence.blum@umb.edu

Acknowledgments: I am very grateful to Mickaella Perina and Christopher Lewis for acute feedback on a late draft of this paper, and for conversations in our "race and class" discussion group over the past three years. I also thank Shahrzad Sabet for an e-mail exchange that helped crystallize my thinking about common class interests and common humanity. I thank my "tutorial" students Hannah Carrillo and Lauren Harcarik for acute comments on the penultimate draft. I wish I had had the benefits of a conversation with graduate students in the Penn/Rutgers Race Reading group earlier than the day before I turned in the final draft, but I thank them for the conversation on that draft.

Notes

---

1. It would be valuable, but beyond the scope of this paper, to undertake the counterpart of this project—to examine obstacles, on the part of those who privilege class in understanding the life situations of racial groups to taking race sufficiently seriously, both explanatorily and normatively.

2. Tommie Shelby is an important exception to this observation. See, for example, "Racial Realities and Corrective Justice: A Reply to Charles Mills," Critical Philosophy of Race, vol. 1, no. 2 (2013),pp. 145-162; and Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent and Reform, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016).

3. Charles Mills, "Racial Exploitation," in Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 117.

4. "Racial Exploitation," 117.

5. "Racial Exploitation," 130.

6. For a historical treatment of racial discrimination, integrating race and class, in a housing system beholden to private, market provision, see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. 2019. Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina).

7. This is not to deny that government housing programs can involve racial discrimination, as they often have historically in the US. But, especially if housing were really treated as a right, there could be safeguards against this development.

8. Kanter, Jody, and Karen Weise, 2022 "How Two Best Friends Beat Amazon," New York Times, April 2.

9. These racial group differences in workplace experience can themselves be a product of both class and racial factors, for example, that the Black health workers tend to live in lower-income neighborhoods, a risk factor (in the US health system) for poorer health; or that they suffer disproportionately from conditions like high blood pressure or hypertension due in part to racial discrimination, stigmatizing, or microaggressions.

10. There is evidence from some recent organizing campaigns that incorporating racial concerns into class-focused organizing is more effective than hoping the appeal to class interests will bridge the racial divide on its own. See the "Race-Class Narrative Project" (at demos.org); Ian Haney-Lopez, Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America (New York: New Press, 2019); Heather McGhee, The Sum of Us: How Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together (New York: One World, 2021)

11. While the relative weakness of the American union movement (compared to Western Europe) is due to several factors, one of them is the successful manipulation by employers of racial division among workers. Michael Goldfield, The Southern Key: Class, Race, and

Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Some would argue that class-based injustices cannot be significantly rectified in a capitalist system. I am sympathetic to that point of view but am not assuming it in this paper.

12. "Racial Exploitation," 121. For Mills racial exploitation is an important component of white supremacy, but not the whole of it. ("Racial Justice," Aristotelian Soc 2018, pp. 85-86).

13. Mills, "Racial Exploitation," 130, quoting M. Oliver and T. Shapiro. 2006. Black Wealth/White Wealth 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge), p. 51.

14. There is a more general, and quite large, issue here about when it is appropriate and when misleading to refer to racial groups as a whole ("Blacks," "whites," "Asian Americans").

15. The difference between (1) and (2) is that (1) concerns the injustice of some not being provided with a basic minimum, while (2) concerns economic resources providing morally inappropriate advantage in access to social goods above the minimum (e.g. higher education, above the secondary school minimum).

16. T. Scanlon shows that there are multiple wrongs and harms involved in "too great" resource disparities. T. Scanlon, Why Does Inequality Matter? (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.)

17. "Racial Justice," 78. "Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice?" 19, 20, 21.

18. Mills does not hold this particular view since he is clear that material injustice and exploitation is part of the white supremacist system, along with the dignitary and recognitional harms involved therein and due to the subpersonhood ideology.

19. Michael Sandel explores both the salience and psychic destructiveness of the "meritocracy" idea, in The Tyranny of Merit (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020). An earlier, powerful, version of his view is R. Sennett and J. Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class (New

York: Knopf, 1973).

20. The notion of a "dignitary harm" from an ideology that casts blacks as intellectually inferior is developed in Derrick Darby and John Rury. 2018. The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.)

21. Showing the entanglement of race and class in cultural representations, some other stereotypes thought of primarily as racial also embody a class dimension, for example, "welfare queen" (for Black women in poverty, not simply Black women). Also middle class Blacks often suffer from a stereotype of Blacks in general as being low-income. Griffin, Shayla Reece. 2015. Those Kids, Our Schools: Race and Reform in an American High School. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press).

22. "Racial Exploitation," 125. "R2s" are people of color.

23. "Retrieving Rawls," 20

24. As mentioned above, this is in no way to deny that poor blacks suffer forms of harm that exacerbate their class-based disadvantages over those of class-comparable whites. Some of these (e.g., "concentration effects" from living in neighborhoods with high poverty) are themselves forms of class-based disadvantage, but with historical race-related causes.

25. "Racial Exploitation," 125.

26. It should be noted that the dignitary harm of "racial stigma" is not normatively uniform across different racial groups. Even if all non-white groups suffer from some social devalue, its specific character differs, including in severity, for each group, in part because the histories of each (Latinxs, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Indigenous) are so different. This is significant in comparing racial to class stigma.

27. Lawrence Mishel and Jori Kandra, "CEO pay has skyrocketed 1322% since 1978,"

Economic Policy Institute, Aug. 10, 2021

28. Alasia Nuti, Injustice and the Reproduction of History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019) insightfully discusses unjust structures persisting through historical time. I am not claiming that the form of subordination in the class and race cases is the same, either in kind or degree, only the more minimal point that class injustice has an historical-structural aspect. One important difference is that a working class person who becomes wealthy is no longer working class (though remaining "of working class origin," an important characteristic), but a Black person who does so is still Black.

29. "Retrieving Rawls," 170, 172.

30. Reed, Touré F. 2020. Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism (Brooklyn, NY: Verso), p. 9.

31. These are not necessarily the only moral wrongs involved. For example, a motive of racial hatred or antipathy, that might render the killing a "hate crime," is present in some situations of killing but not others.

The Washington Post's database on police killings reports that between 2015 and the present police fatally shot 3076 whites and 1623 Blacks. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/?itid=sf_Investigations_sn_police-shootings-database_1. Accessed June 17, 2022. Not everyone agrees that police disproportionately kill more Blacks than whites. https://sci-hub.hkvisa.net/10.1177/1948550618775108. But the general point about disparities does not require this specific example.

32. McGhee, The Sum of Us, 87. As mentioned above (note 10), this book is an excellent integration of class and race perspectives into an overall account of racial injustice, and the spirit

of its overall argument is contrary to that of the quote.

33. Here is a striking example, from a widely admired book, of using racial disparity to explicitly (not only implicitly, as is more common) demote the significance of class, yet tacitly accepting class's dominant causal role: "The lock-in model . . . is technically race-neutral. Everyday choices that have little overt connection to race structure much of our racial landscape. Families pass down wealth to their children on the basis of family connection. Friends recommend each other for jobs . . .One might argue that the lock-in model is based on class or at the very least structural differences that inhere in a democratic, capitalist system." The author then rejects this interpretation in favor of a purely race-focused account. (Daria Roithmayr, Reproducing Racism: How Everyday Choices Lock In White Advantage. [2021 {2014}], New York: NYU Press). Racial disparity here is indeed class-driven. It is not only "technically" but substantively race-neutral, in being driven by the possession of wealth, independent of race but with a racial impact. Note also that the racial disparity way of framing the point implies that the class-related disparities are not themselves unjust, but are morally troubling only insofar as they contribute to racial injustice.

34. In their insightful criticism of disparity framing, Michaels and Reed nevertheless sometimes come close to saying that the only injury in the case of a disparity is the non-comparative injury (being killed, having inadequate health care). 2020. W.B. Michaels and A. Reed, Jr. "The Trouble With Disparity".

35. M. Chowkwanyun and A. Reed, Jr., helpfully recommend that when racial disparities are discussed (they are concerned with covid-related disparities), SES disparities should also be provided (e.g. poverty, level of household crowding). "Racial Health Disparities and Covid-19—Caution and Context," N Engl J Med 2020, 383: 201-03

36. After George Floyd was murdered in May 2020, “systemic racism” started to be used much more commonly as a way to name a systemic but (presumed) purely race-based set of processes and institutions connected with police killings of black people. The class dimension of the earlier Covid era’s understanding of “systemic racism” tended to get lost. See L. Blum. 2020. “On ‘Systemic Racism’,” Black Issues in Philosophy: Blog of the APA, September 1.

37. I. Kawachi, N. Daniels, D. Robinson, “Health Disparities by Race and Class: Why Both Matter,” Health Affairs, 24:2 p. 347.

38. It might be worth noting that Movement for Black Lives, a leading umbrella organization in the Black Lives Matter movement, has a strong economic justice component to its platform: https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/restructure-tax-codes/.