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We Who Are Dark
The Philosophical Foundations
of Black Solidarity

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the legitimate interests of women and other marginalized groups within the broader black population. Moreover, it would be difficult to build stable bonds of political solidarity within such a diverse black population, where differences in culture, gender, sexuality, religion, region, intraracial identity, and political ideology create divergent interests, values, and priorities. Finally, by pressing their case for racial justice in a racially exclusive way, blacks would also run the risk of increasing an already tense racial divide and isolating themselves from needed progressive allies. These considerations suggest that if black political solidarity has a future in the United States, its content must be rethought.

Solidarity without Institutional Autonomy

I believe that the contemporary sociopolitical context calls for *trans-institutional* black solidarity—a form of group unity that does not depend on organizational separatism but rather extends across social organizations within which blacks (could) participate. No doubt, maintaining some black-only or black-controlled organizations is still useful and has its place within the larger social reform effort. Such institutions foster a shared sense of social responsibility and trust among blacks; they offer opportunities for public debate and building consensus; they provide contexts for black youth to develop a strong sense of self-worth; they demonstrate that blacks are capable of independent achievement; and they provide vehicles for resistance and self-defense when interracial solidarity breaks down. Yet it is equally important that these autonomous organizations be supplemented with greater black participation in multiracial associations that are sympathetic to black political interests.¹

This means that, contrary to what many Black Power theorists have argued, black political unity should not be defined by institutional autonomy. Rather, it must be constituted by a joint commitment on the part of individual blacks to maintain solidarity with

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Black Solidarity after Black Power

Blacks must be clear about what they ultimately want, and can reasonably expect, from group solidarity. Do blacks want to maintain themselves indefinitely as a distinct, politically autonomous subnation and to view their autonomy, not simply as a means to full and equal civic standing within a multiracial democratic polity, but as an intrinsic goal? Or should they, following the principles of pragmatic nationalism, regard themselves as a community burdened by the stigma of race and racial inequality, collectively seeking to bring about a society where individuals are no longer unfairly disadvantaged because of their racial classification?

At this historical juncture, the classical position is untenable; black Americans still seeking group autonomy must take a pragmatic approach. But, as we have learned, even this more moderate vision has limitations. Black Power politics, in both its communal and its corporatist forms, is wrought with collective action problems engendered by the geographical dispersal of the greater black community and the residential segregation of its most disadvantaged members. Class divisions pose a problem for democratic representation and accountability, and such intraracial conflict threatens to undermine black political solidarity altogether. Organizational centralization is no solution, for this would threaten

one another regardless of the racial composition of the political organizations in which each participates. This political sensibility, which might be called "pragmatic black consciousness," is as mobile as the individual who exhibits it, and it can have a positive impact on political dynamics through a variety of institutions, not just black ones. In this way, black solidarity would not be limited to the institutions and organizations that blacks effectively control or lead but would expand to every arena, formal and informal, in which politically conscious blacks have influence. The core of black solidarity—the identification, special concern, loyalty, trust, and political principles—is not, nor can it be, inherent in the institutional structures that blacks participate in or control. Although it surely needs to be cultivated and reinforced through interaction and cooperative efforts, this core must lie in the souls of individual blacks themselves.

To give just one example of how such solidarity might function trans-institutionally, consider the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Established in 1969, the CBC consists of black members of the United States Congress who work together to promote legislative initiatives designed to improve the lives and protect the rights of black and other marginalized citizens. These public officials are able to represent the broad range of interests of their multiracial constituencies while also voicing the specific political concerns of black America. Though members of the CBC form only a small minority in a white-dominated legislative body, their unity with one another and with other black citizens enables them to influence federal legislation and to ensure that black interests are not ignored. They have worked individually, together, and with other egalitarians in Congress to push for full employment, raising the minimum wage, equality of educational opportunity, enforcement of civil rights laws, increasing federal funding for urban development and public education, tax cuts for low-income families, and other measures that advance the causes of racial and economic justice.

Blacks situated in other multiracial organizations or institutions could operate analogously, maintaining their solidarity with other blacks while also working to promote causes for which there is no black consensus.

This decentralized form of black solidarity requires a broad division of labor. By this I mean not simply the assignment of responsibilities within an organization, but a broader division of efforts across black society as a whole. While some offer broad political visions, others articulate the concrete measures necessary to realize them. Those focused on tactics are balanced by those driven by principle. While some run for public office, others run their campaigns and yet more act as watchdogs, keeping the public informed and their leaders honest. There must be loud, militant agitators and those who work quietly behind the scenes. Some will have a talent for facilitating public debate, others will be better at influencing public opinion. Some shall seize the tool of law to defend the vulnerable, while others form private associations to help the needy and neglected. Some can fund-raise, others can fund. Some are born to educate, some to inspire, some to cajole. There can be team players and mavericks, traditionalists and innovators, leaders and followers. Few, if any, have the talent, motivation, temperament, and resources to play all these roles effectively. Not even the most revered race men and race women in black history—leaders like Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer—performed all of these roles, and only a handful of people can be expected to devote themselves to black progress as if it were a calling.

Through such a division of tasks, black heterogeneity can serve an emancipatory purpose. Yet in urging each to play a complementary role within the collective struggle, I am not suggesting that someone or some group should be empowered to assign each their task. To avoid intragroup domination and unjust restrictions on individual freedom, black solidarity should be voluntary, nonhierar-

chical, and largely spontaneous. Across the population as a whole, this would therefore be a relatively uncoordinated form of group cooperation, one dependent on individuals moved by a sense of justice, group self-identification, and self-interest to contribute to the effort in a responsible way. Of course within individual organizations, responsibilities may be assigned. But provided one has joined voluntarily and may freely exit, this more coordinated intra-organizational division of labor is not incompatible with individual autonomy.

Three important consequences follow from this conception of solidarity that distinguish it from Black Power politics or community nationalism. First, it holds that black empowerment depends on the political will of individuals to use whatever talents, resources, and influence they possess to push for social reform, and on the willingness of progressive nonblacks to work cooperatively toward a more just social order—both highly contingent factors, to say the least. Second, such solidarity would not ensure that the black population in the United States could speak truth to power with one unified voice, for there would be no person or recognized corporate vehicle with the authority to represent the interests of all blacks. Third, blacks would moderate the demand for race-based organizations, for they would seek to join multiracial political organizations and to accept nonblacks as equal members in many of their own institutions.

These three consequences would undoubtedly lead some to see this as a toothless, and thus worthless, form of political solidarity. However, blacks must face up to the fact that organizational unity and group cohesiveness cannot deliver all that Black Power theorists promised. This does not mean that black solidarity is not worth sustaining and cultivating. Blacks continue to need the protection that such solidarity affords, and they can use what unity they do have to demand, encourage, and work toward greater racial justice. What they cannot do is expect that black solidarity would

or could secure all or even most of the wide-ranging political interests of blacks. Pragmatic black nationalism might be less ferocious than Black Power, but that does not make it worthless or politically impotent, just more realistic. Blacks should emphasize the continuing importance of black political unity while also recognizing its limitations and its diminished—though not extinguished—progressive potential since the decline of the Black Power movement.

Others may charge that I have abandoned the nationalist tradition. For them, black nationalism is inconceivable without some form of racial separatism. But I would suggest that the integration/separation dichotomy should never have been regarded as the sine qua non of black nationalism. At one time, blacks might have been able to avoid racial oppression by physically moving away from states or neighborhoods controlled by whites. Today, geographical or institutional separation offers little escape from white influence. In fact, it might now be more pragmatic for blacks to be *dispersed* in order to exert influence within the multiracial institutions and informal networks that largely determine blacks' life chances. In this way, black dignity can be affirmed, black unity preserved, and black freedom attained, without relying on institutional autonomy or exaggerating the liberatory potential of group unity. Pragmatic nationalism is not a group-undermining form of "liberal individualism," as some might suppose. It is simply the form of black political solidarity most appropriate to the twenty-first century.

Ideological and Structural Causes of Black Disadvantage

I will now lay some of the philosophical and social-theoretic foundations for this alternative conception of solidarity. To begin with, any viable form of black political solidarity must distinguish the different sources of black disadvantage. There are (a) disadvantages that all blacks face because of contemporary racism; (b) disadvantages that some blacks face because of inherited handicaps attributable to past racial domination; and (c) disadvantages that some

blacks face because of nonracial structural factors that have a negative impact on the life prospects of blacks.²

Racism is an *ideology*, a set of misleading and irrationally held beliefs and assumptions that serve to bring about and reinforce structural relations of oppression.³ These social illusions, like the belief that blacks are intellectually inferior, are socially reproduced through norms that are embedded in the culture. These ideas are typically accepted, often unconsciously, because of the subject's unacknowledged desires or fears. For instance, some white workers have embraced racist beliefs and sentiments when they have been anxious about the entrance of lower-paid blacks into an already competitive labor market.⁴ Racist ideologies emerged with and legitimized the transatlantic slave trade and European domination over "darker" peoples. These peoples were "racialized" in an effort to justify their subjugation and exploitation; that is, the idea of biological "race," the linchpin of the ideology, was used to impute an inherent and inalterable set of physical characteristics to the subordinate groups, an "essential nature" that supposedly set them apart from the dominant group and that explained why they could legitimately be exploited. Although racial ideology has far fewer explicit adherents or proud defenders in the United States today than it once did, and its content and form have shifted with historical and political circumstances, it continues to be expressed, often in implicit and unconscious ways, through the attitudes and conduct of many.⁵ Racist ideology engenders and rationalizes discrimination against, neglect of, and outright hostility toward those it socially marks as "blacks," with consequences for virtually every sphere of social life. These familiar forms of racism, whether expressed in the operation of institutional structures, the mass media, or everyday social interaction, cause many of the burdens that blacks presently shoulder. Moreover, susceptibility to being harmed by racism is still a central feature of the black experience in America.

But some obstacles to black freedom and self-realization have their sources elsewhere. Some of these obstacles are structural disadvantages—such as inequalities in wealth, opportunities, and political power—that are the direct result of discriminatory treatment perpetrated in the past. Racial disparities in wealth and education, for instance, partly derive from a history of chattel slavery, land expropriation, destruction of property, forced segregation, and state-sanctioned racial discrimination. These historical injustices continue to have a negative impact on the life prospects of many African Americans despite the fact that these practices have been effectively proscribed. For example, because previous generations of blacks were largely prevented from accumulating wealth and gaining a formal education, many blacks born after the fall of Jim Crow have inherited few, if any, financial assets or educational advantages, putting them at a distinct disadvantage in relation to their white counterparts, many of whom have even benefited from past racial injustice.⁶ In the absence of efforts to remedy these historically engendered inequities, blacks would continue to be relatively disadvantaged in our market-driven society even if racism were to be completely eliminated.

In addition, though, racial inequality has been exacerbated by social dynamics that cannot be attributed to the workings of racist ideology, such as a postindustrial U.S. economy that generally dispenses high rewards to persons with a college education and miserably low wages to those without; stagnation and decline in economic sectors that rely heavily on low-skilled workers; and changes in the tax code that favor individuals and households with significant financial assets. None of these developments rely directly on contemporary expressions of racism to produce their far-reaching social consequences. Yet they disproportionately impact blacks in a society where deep racial inequalities in education, employment opportunities, and wealth already exist, and they worsen

racial inequality and create new forms of disadvantage. Consider the following example offered from Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro:

Four IRS mandated benefits can flow from home ownership: (1) the home mortgage interest deduction; (2) the deduction for local real estate taxes; (3) the avoidance of taxes on the sale of a home when it is "rolled over" into another residence, and; (4) the one-time permanent exclusion of up to \$125,000 of profit on the sale of a home after the age of fifty-five. Put quite simply, since blacks are less likely to own homes, they are less likely to be able to take advantage of these benefits. Furthermore, since black homes are on average less expensive than white homes, blacks derive less benefit than whites when they do utilize these tax provisions.⁷

The racial consequences of this ostensibly race-neutral tax scheme are clear: It disadvantages blacks in their attempt to accumulate wealth and other desirable social goods. But if racist ideology, including racial stereotypes and implicit racial bias, played no role in its enactment—for instance, by corrupting the decision making of lawmakers—then it is misleading to characterize the negative impact of the tax scheme on blacks as a form of racism.⁸ Indeed, such a characterization would be unhelpful in that it fails to identify the primary source of the problem (in this case wealth inequality) and leads to inappropriate remedies. Although blacks will disagree over which of these factors is the most significant in shaping their life chances, it is crucial that they recognize that black disadvantage is created by a complex set of ideologies, structural factors, and unintended social consequences, not just racism.

Agency, Responsibility, and Social Realities

Some will object that in emphasizing ideological and structural causes of black disadvantage I am ignoring *behavioral* causes. In

particular, they will argue that some blacks among the working class and ghetto poor fail to take advantage of the employment and educational opportunities available to them and often irresponsibly engage in self-undermining activities—such as unprotected sex, street crime, illegal drug use, and consumption of luxury items—that further impoverishes urban communities.

To be sure, anyone who violates the rights of others should be held accountable, and those who make immoral choices are rightly criticized and sometimes punished for doing so, especially when these decisions impose unfair burdens on their children, families, or fellow citizens. But without denying that disadvantaged blacks should take responsibility for the choices they make—after all, rich or poor, we're all capable of making bad choices—it is unfair and callous for black elites to preach to those in dark ghettos about how they ought to conduct their lives when we know that there are not enough jobs, that the public school system is in need of radical reform, and that racial discrimination remains a serious social problem. We also know that living in severely impoverished conditions shapes the attitudes of the poor toward work and education.⁹ Hence, the poor often fail to develop the skills, credentials, and discipline needed to fare well in a capitalist economy. In addition, the combination of racism and poverty tends to severely damage the sense of self-worth and self-efficacy of its victims, a condition that is worsened by the lack of opportunities to be publicly valued and esteemed.¹⁰ It should not be surprising that hopelessness, hedonism, and self-destructive behavior are the results.

Elites' criticism of the ghetto poor is also often presumptuous and condescending. Individuals who have demonstrated genuine concern for, and earned the trust of, poor blacks should certainly encourage them to take advantage of the meager employment opportunities that do exist, to study hard and stay in school, and to avoid activities that will likely exacerbate their situation. But such encouragement and practical advice is most effective when offered

by persons on intimate terms with those who would benefit from hearing it. Simply being an affluent member of "the black community" hardly gives one the standing to berate poor blacks for their decisions or lifestyles. And self-righteous moralizing about the bad behavior of inner-city blacks will only alienate the severely disadvantaged from better-off African Americans, causing resentment and thus undermining the effort to build the kind of solidarity that would enable blacks to push collectively for the very social changes that would reduce such self-defeating behaviors.

Moreover, a one-sided focus on the behavioral causes of black disadvantage often gives rise to two tendencies that must absolutely be avoided if a more just society is to be achieved. The first is the temptation to substitute self-help programs for political action aimed at removing ideological and structural obstacles to equal opportunity. When political resistance to progressive change is formidable or stubborn, there is a dangerous tendency among elites to overemphasize self-help strategies or, worse, to opt for these strategies exclusively. Peer counseling, religious proselytizing, moral exhortation, and charitable giving, as worthy and worthwhile as they might be, do not constitute a politics. They are simply survival tactics.

The second tendency to be avoided is the use of the discourse of "personal responsibility" as a rationalization for not channeling public resources to those desperately in need. Providing these vital goods often requires sacrifices on the part of the better-off, and it is no surprise that some elites are reluctant to admit that justice necessitates these sacrifices. Yet a decent minimum standard of living must be guaranteed if we are to take seriously the principle of equal citizenship and to enable all members of our society to live with dignity and self-respect. Frustration with or resentment of the bad choices of some does not justify the withholding of the resources necessary to affirm their equal status among us.

Others might challenge the distinction between ideological and structural causes of black disadvantage, on the grounds that we are rarely, if ever, able to so neatly separate these factors, an epistemic situation that is only made worse by the fact that these causes interact in complex ways with behavioral factors. These distinctions, while perhaps straightforward in the abstract, are difficult to employ in practice. For example, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the members of a poor black community to determine with any accuracy whether their impoverished condition is due primarily to institutional racism, the impact of past racial injustice, the increasing technological basis of the economy, shrinking state budgets, the vicissitudes of world trade, the ascendancy of conservative ideology, poorly funded schools, lack of personal initiative, a violent drug trade that deters business investment, some combination of these factors, or some other explanation altogether. Moreover, it is notoriously difficult to determine when the formulation of putatively race-neutral policies has been motivated by racism or when such policies are unfairly applied by racially biased public officials.

There are very real empirical difficulties in determining the specific causal significance of the factors that create and perpetuate black disadvantage; nonetheless, it is clear that these factors exist and that justice will demand different practical remedies according to each factor's relative impact on blacks' life chances. We must acknowledge that our social world is complicated and not immediately transparent to common sense, and thus that systematic empirical inquiry, historical studies, and rigorous social analysis are required to reveal its systemic structure and sociocultural dynamics. There is, moreover, no mechanical or infallible procedure for determining which analyses are the soundest ones. In addition, given the inevitable bias that attends social inquiry, legislators and those they represent cannot simply defer to social-scientific experts. We must instead rely on open public debate—among politicians,

scholars, policy makers, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens—with the aim of garnering rationally motivated and informed consensus. And even if our practical decision procedures rest on critical deliberative discourse and thus live up to our highest democratic ideals, some trial and error through actual practice is unavoidable.

These difficulties and complications notwithstanding, a general recognition of the distinctions among the ideological and structural causes of black disadvantage could help blacks refocus their political energies and self-help strategies. Attention to these distinctions might help expose the superficiality of theories that seek to reduce all the social obstacles that blacks face to contemporary forms of racism or white supremacy. A more penetrating, subtle, and empirically grounded analysis is needed to comprehend the causes of racial inequality and black disadvantage. Indeed, these distinctions highlight the necessity to probe deeper to find the causes of contemporary forms of racism, as some racial conflict may be a symptom of broader problems or recent social developments (such as immigration policy or reduced federal funding for higher education).

The distinction between disadvantages caused by racism, on the one hand, and by race-neutral social factors, on the other, draws attention to the fact that blacks as individuals or as a group will often have common interests with members of nonblack groups. And given the magnitude of some social problems—such as increasing economic inequality, declining real wages, substandard public schools, urban poverty and joblessness, the scarcity of low-cost quality housing, and the high costs of adequate health care—multi-racial efforts based on those common interests will be essential for progressive social change. Moreover, if the factors that create and sustain antiblack racism are rooted in the basic structure of U.S. capitalism, as radical democrats and socialists have often argued, we may find that the interests of blacks significantly overlap with

the interests of other groups fighting for workers' rights and economic justice.¹¹ A narrow focus on racism as *the* cause of black disadvantage runs the risk of needlessly putting blacks in conflict with potential allies.¹²

Third, these distinctions can alert blacks to possible conflicts of interest within the group. A social obstacle caused by antiblack racism is potentially of concern to all blacks, because all are vulnerable, in one way or another, to this form of injustice. And although a social problem with a nonracial social explanation—for instance, that high unemployment among blacks is due to the unavailability of well-paying jobs for low-skilled workers—should be of concern to all, it might engender serious concern only in a subset of the black population. Even the fact that some blacks still suffer the effects of past racism will not necessarily move all blacks equally, for some have managed to secure a privileged social position within the current stratified order despite the legacy of racism.

The core suggestion here is that black solidarity can still be a useful tool of resistance when it comes to problems of race. Yet with other important political issues and social problems, the interests of different segments of the black population often diverge or even conflict. With these latter concerns, having someone or some group speak about *the* will of the black population not only would be misleading but would seriously threaten the legitimate interests of many. When we clearly distinguish the various sources of black disadvantage, we highlight fault lines within the greater black population that are often obscured when we talk loosely about the subordinate position of blacks in America. The point of stressing these internal sources of conflict is not to further fragment or undermine black unity. Instead, the aim is to demonstrate the necessity of making a realistic assessment of the progressive potential of black political solidarity. Once it has been rethought, pragmatic black nationalism can still play a positive role in contemporary U.S. politics.

The Content of "Black" Solidarity

The foregoing considerations raise a fundamental question: What are (or could be) the underlying basic principles of a specifically *black* political solidarity? The realm of domestic politics in a liberal capitalist democracy includes (1) the relations of dominance and subordination, legitimate or illegitimate, between the government and the inhabitants of the state's sovereign territory; and (2) the operation and internal structure of nongovernmental institutions (such as corporations, economic markets, schools, and political organizations) and of informal social networks that significantly shape how scarce but vital resources are distributed and how legitimate authority is obtained, structured, and exercised. I understand black politics to be collective action that aims to advance black interests by altering the constellation of benefits, burdens, and power within this complex domain. Given this, the fundamental question for us is, What are "black interests"? Are they the group interests of the U.S. black population qua irreducible national community? I have argued that either this conception of black interests assumes an untenable conception of black cohesiveness, or it wrongly supposes that it is possible and desirable for blacks to become a corporate body with would-be representatives who speak for the whole.

My alternative suggestion is that we conceptualize black interests in terms of the unfair social disadvantages that some individuals or groups face because they are (or their ancestors were) socially defined as members of the "black race." This is "identity politics" only in the sense that individuals who are widely regarded, and generally regard themselves, as members of a distinct social group participate in collective political action. It is not what some call a "politics of recognition."¹³ That is to say, it does not seek to institutionalize or publicly affirm black ethnic, cultural, or national distinctiveness. Nor, I hasten to add, does it seek to abolish blackness as a positive social identity. Rather, this is a black politics whose aim is to re-

move or mitigate the ideological and structural obstacles to the equal civic standing and equal life chances of those who are socially classified as racially black. On this conception of solidarity, black politics is not simply a matter of promoting the interests of blacks, as if black people were just another "interest group" seeking advantages through traditional political processes. Black politics is instead about identifying, correcting, and ultimately eliminating race-based injustices. In this way, black political solidarity should be understood as black collective action in the interest of racial justice, not on behalf of an ideal of blackness.

Adolph Reed has argued forcefully against the "politics of authenticity," where some normative standard—whether petit bourgeois self-help ideology, grassroots radicalism, cultural nationalism, or Pan-Africanism—is posited as representing the "real" group interest of all blacks. He is also suspicious of attempts by would-be leaders to speak for the black population as a whole, especially when they lack an identifiable popular base of support that can effectively hold them accountable. But Reed maintains that limiting black politics to race-based problems artificially restricts the scope of legitimate political action. Alternatively, he defines black political activity as

a dynamic set of social relations and interests that converge on some issues as consequential for broad sectors of the black population and that diverge from others, based on other identities and interest aggregations. This is a black politics that does not pretend to exhaust all, or even necessarily the most important, aspects of all black people's political concerns and activity. It is a notion of black politics in which black people, as individuals and as groups, organize, form alliances, and enter coalitions freely on the basis of mutually constituted interests, crisscrossing racial boundaries as they find it pragmatically appropriate.¹⁴

Reed's trenchant critiques of contemporary black political culture are often compelling. Yet black politics should not be understood as just any political intervention by a large group of blacks with mutually recognized shared interests. Take, for example, a group of black residents living in an all-black or predominantly black neighborhood who collectively protest the placement of a toxic waste dump near their community. Does this constitute *black* politics? I would argue *yes only* if their political action is based, at least in part, on their shared belief that public officials or the relevant corporations had acted on racial prejudice or bias (whether conscious or unconscious) and treated this community, because it is black, as if it were due less than equal concern and respect. However, if environmental racism is not the concern, and the community has simply come together to protect their interests in preserving an environmentally safe neighborhood, then their action should not be conceived as an expression of black politics.¹⁵

If we are to leave behind all residual traces of racial essentialism, we must allow that it is possible for blacks to act in concert without this being motivated by racial identification or a concern for how their actions would impact blacks as a group. I agree with Reed that we should not deny that blacks, both individually and collectively, can act politically in all sorts of ways without their actions springing from specifically racial concerns. But neither should we think that every political action carried out by a group of blacks is an instance of black politics, even if that group is large and race-conscious.¹⁶ The failure to fully appreciate this point is often a symptom of a racial ideology that, as Barbara Fields points out, absurdly assumes that everything that blacks do or say is somehow "racial."¹⁷

Moreover, Reed's conception of black politics reduces it to an ad hoc basis, a kind of black *modus vivendi*.¹⁸ He treats black politics as *solely* a matter of particular black individuals or groups responding to specific circumstances that affect their interests and negotiating a common basis for collective action. The consensus reached through

such mutual adjustment is only as stable as the contingent circumstances that have brought about this convergence of interests. The virtue of this approach is that it conceives of black politics as pragmatic and voluntary. Yet its limitation lies in the fact that it treats black political solidarity as merely a matter of short-term alliances. This is not a kind of unity that blacks can rely on in the long-term struggle for racial justice. A mere black intragroup coalition politics would have the weakness of all coalition politics—instability. A shift in the constellation of power among the relevant groups leads, too often, to the withdrawal of needed forces or the exclusion of marginalized elements. Blacks need a form of solidarity that includes a standing readiness to act collectively in the political arena, a unity rooted in a set of principles that all can be reasonably expected to affirm. Without this, black politics lacks the foundation needed for continuous endeavor. Indeed, in the absence of this principled solidaristic disposition, it is not clear that we should be talking of "black politics" at all, as opposed to proclaiming its demise.¹⁹ Reed's "black politics" embraces limited cooperation for mutual advantage, but not solidarity. This requires us to reject Reed's position, despite its several positive dimensions, because it fails to recognize that a meaningful form of black political solidarity is still viable in the post-Jim Crow era.

To address skepticism toward my thesis, we must distinguish between the interests that blacks share *because* they are black (such as combating racial discrimination) and the interests that some blacks may happen to share for reasons unrelated to their blackness (such as securing low-cost health care). The latter set of interests need not be shared by all or even many blacks and may significantly overlap with the interests of nonblack groups. The former set of interests potentially binds all blacks together, for these interests are bound up with eradicating the racial stigma and racial injustice that unfairly limit the liberties and opportunities of blacks. It is only these interests associated with racial justice that, I believe, should now be

characterized as "black interests" in the relevant political sense of the phrase. Accordingly, I would urge that we define black politics, not only in terms of (1) the common racial identity of the agents who engage in it, but also, and more importantly, in terms of (2) the political interests those agents share because of the unfair social consequences that this ascriptive racial identity typically entails and engenders and (3) the mutual recognition of the need to work collectively to advance these shared interests in racial justice.

This limitation in scope might appear to have an ideological dimension, because it is rooted in a commitment to individual autonomy, a value that is associated with liberalism. But the constraint just as readily can be defended on conceptual and pragmatic grounds. Black political action is constituted by black collective interventions in the political realm on behalf of black interests. Under current conditions, the only interests that blacks share on account of their being black and that can also serve as a stable and legitimate basis for political unity are race-related ones—fighting racism, promoting racial equality, eliminating racialized poverty, and reducing racial antagonism.

Now, some who conceptualize black politics as any political intervention of a sufficiently large group of blacks tacitly invoke the idea that blacks, quite apart from their vulnerability to being harmed by racial injustice, form an inextricably linked black nation. On this familiar kinship conception of blackness, a core element of classical black nationalism, anything that would affect the interests of some group of blacks or, at the limit, any black person, should be of concern to all blacks simply because they are black. It is as if each black person were a family member whose interests are seen as intimately and inescapably bound up with the interests of all other members. But as I have discussed in previous chapters, this romantic vision of black unity, despite its *prima facie* appeal, is an unrealistic and invalid attempt to extend the idea of familial loyalty to racialized groups.²⁰

Disproportionate Impact and Racial Equality

There is, however, a more plausible version of this kinship concept that should be considered. According to this view, any remediable social problem that *disproportionately* affects blacks (such as urban poverty, joblessness, or failing schools), regardless of whether it has been caused by racism, is a matter of black political interests.²¹ Now of course blacks, as U.S. citizens and as human beings, should be concerned about these social problems and should do their part to correct them. But our focus here is the political basis of *black* solidarity, not the moral obligations of American citizens or persons *qua* moral agents. Ours is a question about what black political unity specifically requires and aims at, a form of solidarity that need not, and indeed should not, define all of the moral and political commitments that a black person takes himself or herself to have.

Our question might be put this way: What political principles can blacks reasonably expect all other blacks, because they are black, to commit to as a basis for group action? Given the differences in socioeconomic condition that currently exist, this "disproportionate impact" approach to black interests is not a reliable basis for political unity. Blacks simply cannot expect such broad support where material interests and racial classification diverge sharply. The very fact that a given social policy disproportionately affects the black population, as opposed to impacting all blacks, is a reason to think that some blacks will likely defect from the collective fight to resist it. For example, we have reason to believe that, on average, black elites will not have the same level of concern about social disadvantages that primarily affect working-class blacks (such as the unavailability of jobs that pay a living wage) as they will have about the closing off of opportunities for the more affluent (such as legal proscriptions against preferential treatment in higher education). This suggests that the alternative kinship conception is still implicit-

ity tied to the dubious idea of an irreducible black nation. Its defenders often hold out the unrealistic hope that all blacks will be equally invested, or nearly so, in all forms of disadvantage that affect blacks.

Some endorse the disproportionate-impact view of black political interests because they are convinced that where an institution, practice, or policy disproportionately and negatively affects blacks, racism is the root cause. But, as I argued earlier, the causes of black disadvantage are diverse and complexly interrelated. It is simply a mistake to assume that racism, past or present, can explain every form of social disadvantage from which blacks disproportionately suffer. The dangers in this assumption are twofold: it can lead some blacks to expect allies within the broader black population where there are none or too few, and it can mislead them into thinking that their interests are always opposed to those of nonblacks. Either way, this assumption gives rise to self-defeating forms of classical black nationalism.

There is, however, an important aspect of the disproportionate-impact view that should be regarded as a matter of black interests, properly understood. Many policies and practices that have a disproportionate negative effect on blacks, regardless of whether these policies and practices spring from racist motives or bias, will worsen or reproduce racial inequality, such as higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, and poverty among blacks than among whites. This outcome would reinforce widely held racist assumptions, such as that blacks are "naturally" less intelligent, lazier, and more violent than the members of other racial groups. Social outcomes that seem to confirm racial stereotypes will inevitably perpetuate ideological illusions about "racial" differences, and the persistence of such a racist ideology does negatively affect all blacks. Given that blacks want to end or reduce racism, they should therefore also be concerned about *substantive* racial inequality. Demanding procedural equality and equal opportunity will not be suf-

ficient, because, as we observed earlier in this chapter with the case of inequalities in wealth, a policy or practice can be race-neutral in conception and implementation and yet still reproduce or worsen racial inequalities. I am not suggesting that proportionate racial representation or racial parity in all significant sectors of social life is, in itself, a principle of justice. But if we are serious about erasing racial stigma, then we must attend to racial outcomes and not regard their consideration as always opposed or irrelevant to social justice.²² Careful consideration of how a given policy, procedure, or practice will impact the *relative* life prospects and political power of different racial groups must be a component of any antiracist agenda.

Of course, if so-called racial differences were not reified or naturalized as they are in our racialized culture, blacks' being overrepresented among the poor and underrepresented among the affluent would not lead to stigmatizing assumptions about the inferiority of blacks. But given the power and sheer inertia of racial ideology, these suspicions linger, perhaps even among some blacks. Some people even have the perverse disposition to cling to any "evidence" that might appear to confirm black inferiority. Consider, for example, the "best-seller" status of such books as Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1996) and Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1996). It would be nice to think that racist beliefs could be eradicated simply by education, counterevidence, or dialogue. And perhaps someday such beliefs will be generally regarded as silly superstitions of a bygone era. In the meantime, the rights and opportunities of some are being unfairly limited by the continuing existence of racist stereotypes and racial bias. To ensure that the life prospects and political liberties of blacks are not thus obstructed, blacks should regard themselves as having a pragmatic stake in policies that would move the country closer to substantive racial equality.

To give just one example of how this commitment might express

itself, consider the distressingly high incarceration rates of young blacks, especially males. To the extent that these rates are due to institutional racism in the criminal justice system (for example, racial profiling, unfair sentencing, and racial bias in drug laws), blacks can work to reduce them on grounds of racial justice. But they should also fight to reduce them because high rates of imprisonment stigmatize all black youth as violent, undisciplined, lazy, and lawless, thus reducing their life prospects and perpetuating racial stereotypes. We should keep in mind, moreover, that black rates of imprisonment would be disproportionately high even if the criminal justice system were free of racial bias, because blacks, especially black children, are disproportionately poor. Because of desperation, the poor are more likely to commit crimes for which they will be caught and punished, and they are less likely to have the resources (for instance, money for bail or quality legal counsel) that will enable them to escape jail-time. So here we see why blacks should advocate for government policies and promote self-help strategies that will reduce substantive racial inequality. Such measures, when fair to all who will be affected by them, can contribute to the quest for racial justice.

Some will still want to retain a more expansive conception of black political solidarity than the one defended here. One way of making the case for this would be to insist that black interests are not limited to racial justice but also include any progressive agenda that a group of blacks attempts to advance *qua* black people. That is, the political intervention would be motivated by their self-understanding as black people *on behalf of* black people, whether or not the political concern could plausibly be construed as resistance to racial injustice. For example, fighting for socialism or gay rights, despite the fact that most blacks favor neither, could nevertheless be an expression of black solidarity, provided it was carried out in the spirit of unity.

But by leaving the normative content of political blackness

completely unspecified, we run into a difficulty discussed earlier: namely, not all blacks, given their diverse interests, priorities, and values, could reasonably be expected to endorse every political intervention undertaken "on their behalf" by a group of race-conscious blacks. Of course, individual blacks or black subgroups should advocate for whatever causes they believe in, and they should try to convince other blacks to join these causes. A problem arises, however, when activists or would-be spokespersons represent such political interventions as if they were expressions of the will of the black community. As African American history teaches us, some of the things done or said by blacks on behalf of blacks would be unwelcome by many of their intended beneficiaries. Recall, for example, the case of antebellum free blacks negotiating with President Lincoln over the resettlement of the black population to Latin America or Africa. We should also remind ourselves of Booker T. Washington's political program, which suggested to whites that blacks were willing to sacrifice their civil rights in order to advance economically. Or consider the more recent attempt by Ward Connerly to get state governments to no longer recognize "black" or other racial categories as relevant social classifications within the public sphere, despite the fact that this would inhibit the state's ability to enforce civil rights laws.

In the present context, in which many would welcome a solution to the long-standing "Negro problem" as long as it would cost them little or nothing to enact, prominent and well-connected blacks who propose such answers will inevitably be taken seriously by the wider public even if they lack broad support within the black population. Blacks currently lack an effective means to hold such persons accountable, as well as any means to effectively affirm or dissent from their public declarations in a way that will be heard by those in power.

Blacks do have some control over the public officials whom they elect to represent them, especially in majority-black districts, as

these persons can sometimes be voted out of office if they are unresponsive to black concerns. But these representatives, as important as they are, will be insufficient to successfully carry the cause of racial justice forward in the current political climate, where far too many citizens are indifferent, if not hostile, to the calls of public officials for racial redress. Grassroots organizers, civil rights activists, civic associations, political organizations, intellectuals, and publicly engaged citizens, all acting in the spirit of solidarity, are therefore still vital.

Although black corporatism is not desirable as a means for creating democratic accountability within the context of the form of solidarity defended here, a public philosophy might be an attractive alternative. As I have emphasized, such a philosophy should not, and could not, be a comprehensive political ideology. Yet some common understanding of the scope and content of black political unity is needed, if only at the level of general principles. The elimination of racism, ghetto poverty, and racial inequality is in the interests of all blacks qua blacks. When black activists acting in the name of black people work for racial justice, such acts can reasonably be expected to garner consensus; and therefore these actions have some measure of legitimacy. These basic values could therefore function as "fixed points" of agreement, not in the sense of a bedrock foundation that should never be revised, but as principles that should be altered or discarded only after serious and careful consideration. They could serve as an implicit "Black Constitution"—as precepts that would informally regulate and sanction black political action. One concrete upshot of the establishment of such a public philosophy would be this: Any would-be black spokesperson who urged policies clearly incongruent with these principles would be met with a loud chorus of dark voices ringing out in collective dissent.

5

Race, Culture, and Politics

It is inconceivable that I feel alienated from the Western tradition; my people have contributed so much that is vital and good to it. I am alienated from the *people* who call themselves white, who think they own Western tradition.

—Nikki Giovanni, *Racism 101* (1994)

I have argued that a black public philosophy should include a commitment to antiracism, antipoverty, and substantive racial equality. Yet many advocates of black solidarity would urge that we also include a commitment to black cultural autonomy. At least since the late nineteenth century, prominent black intellectuals, artists, and activists have advocated various forms of black cultural self-determination. And as William Van Deburg has observed, cultural nationalism, perhaps more than any other ideology of the Black Power era, continues to have an enormous impact on African American self-understanding, political consciousness, and social institutions.¹ Moreover, the cultural politics of difference (or multiculturalism), which many progressives embrace, has some striking similarities to the cultural nationalism of the Black Power movement. Thus many have come to think of this "politics of recognition" as an enduring component of black politics.