Review

A realistic blacktopia: Why we must unite to fight

Derrick Darby

How is it possible to improve the material conditions of the poor in the United States, whose number is disproportionately black? How is it possible to treat every citizen as deserving of dignity, including black citizens vulnerable to gerrymandering, disenfranchisement, and vote dilution? In *A Realistic Blacktopia*, Derrick Darby makes a compelling argument that improving the condition of black citizens requires forging alliances among marginalized communities. My critique is that Darby sometimes refrains from pursuing this argument to its logical conclusion: reaching out to white working-class Trump supporters.

The book challenges the progressive story that 'race-specific remedies are required to address racial wrongs' (p. 2). Darby knows that African Americans still lag behind whites on many objective measures and that the legacy of slavery and red-lining practices contributed to this situation. His argument is that if African Americans want substantive, and not just symbolic, progress, then they need to pitch a bigger tent: 'And the reason is obvious: the substantive things blacks want for themselves are also things that other marginalized populations want too, and to get them we must unite to fight' (p. 4).

Darby identifies conservative jurists as one reason that race-specific remedies will not fly in a supposedly post-racial America. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas says that the 'Constitution abhors classifications based on race' and that 'every time the government places citizens on racial registers and makes race relevant to the provision of burdens or benefits, it demeans us all' (p. 29). Chief Justice Roberts argues that the 'way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race' (p. 107). Whites are unlikely to understand and sympathize with arguments for reparations or affirmative action, according to Darby, because they psychologically resist viewing themselves as responsible for injustices done centuries or decades ago.

It is not just conservatives who are wary of marching under the race-first flag. Many conservatives, moderates, whites, and blacks are 'fatigued with and

dismissive of arguments playing the race card' (p. 205). One reason is that blacks have more political representatives than in the past, and the registration gap between black and white voters is shrinking (p. 35). The Voting Rights Act, and other civil rights laws, worked, at least in part. Furthermore, Darby holds that it is morally problematic to argue that black poverty is somehow more egregious than other kinds of poverty. Perhaps the philosopher Charles Mills can argue for reparations to rectify historical injustices, but in the real world, liberals like Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders do not 'support this radical view of racial justice' (p. 74).

One example that Darby offers of a big-tent remedy for political problems is the principle of universal access to voting. The Supreme Court case of *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) overturned the provisions of the Voting Rights Act that required certain states to get federal permission before changing their voting rules. The conservative jurists held that the constitutionality of such provisions had expired. Darby does not think that lawyers will likely win an argument for reinstating those provisions, and he does not think it is necessary. Instead, legislators and judges should adhere to the principle that all citizens, regardless of race, deserve to vote, and should prohibit policies such as Voter ID laws or felon disenfranchisement that keep people from voting.

A second example of a big-tent political remedy is class-based college admissions. The 2003 Supreme Court case of *Grutter v. Bollinger* argued that institutions of higher education could not use racial quotas for admission, but they could take a holistic view of each applicant. It is possible that the Supreme Court will soon tighten the restrictions on affirmative action in higher education even more. Rather than bemoan this situation, colleges and universities might look at poverty, the applicant's family's level of education, and socio-economic burdens when deciding whom to admit (p. 118).

Darby identifies Martin Luther King, Jr. as a predecessor in using big-tent approaches to improve the situation of working-class people who were often black. King's famous 'I Have a Dream' speech was delivered at a 1963 march for jobs and freedom, and near the end of life he argued that the civil rights movement needed to take on poverty, exploitation, and racial disparities (p. 217). In the epilogue, Darby criticizes radicals who focus on race to the exclusion of class. This kind of militancy 'leaves no room at all for us to consider a democratic politics that takes us beyond race and lays the groundwork for inter-racial coalitions that target those who stand to gain the most materially from democracy's discontents' (p. 245).

Darby draws on W.E.B. Du Bois to argue why justice requires democracy. The 'masses know their own "souls", and this knowledge is vital for securing democracy's normative aim to secure the broadest measure of justice for all' (p. 177). The people may lack sophisticated knowledge of history and policy, but they know when they are hurting, and they have reasons to vote for some candidates and not others. By granting all adults the franchise, society honors each person's dignity

to use their own mind and hands in shaping the collective future, and free and fair elections tend to produce better outcomes than elite-rule.

My critique of Darby is that he sometimes shies away from pursuing his argument to its conclusion of forging coalitions with the white working class. Take the title of his book, *A Realistic Blacktopia*. Why does Darby call for the creation of a black space (*topos*), rather than, say, 'a beloved community' that welcomes everyone? For a book that criticizes philosophers and movements for 'flying the race-first flag' (p. 3), it is peculiar that the book's title is a race-first flag.

Second, take the subtitle of the book: *Why We Must Unite to Fight*. Who is the 'we' in this sentence? And what are we 'uniting to fight'? Darby takes this idea from Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matters (BLM), who states '"unite to fight" is a call to bring those of us stratified and segregated by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and body, country of origin, and the like together to fight back against truly oppressive power' (p. 11). It is hard to see how these different constituencies could unite on more than a handful of issues, and it is not clear that Darby and Garza agree on who is the 'truly oppressive power', given Darby's desire to move away from race-first policies. Throughout his book and elsewhere, Darby (2022) acknowledges that identities can both empower and restrict, and he observes phenomena such as Obama voters who turned to Trump or blacks who prefer to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps rather than rely on government handouts (pp. 75, 76). Darby's book undermines the notion that there is a stable 'we' that can unite to fight against a unified oppressor. Politics is more fluid than that.

I would have liked to see a more robust defense of multi-racial democracy. Darby assures us that his argument is principled, and not just pragmatic. It 'is rooted in a normative objective of promoting social consensus, or at least minimizing social divisiveness, in pursuit of effective ways of realizing our common aims as a community' (p. 105). I don't know what this means. What are our common aims as a community? Are there such things? Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that his view of human equality and fraternity was grounded in God's love, *agape*, and that he envisioned blacks and whites as siblings. If he does not want to go down King's route, Darby still needs to give a fuller explanation of why he cares about the white working class.

Darby ends the book with the argument that 'a broader multi-racial politics of class is also essential to achieving a truly democratic society' (p. 243). The question that remains after reading the book is: how will Darby, and the left more generally, reach out to the white working class who feel alienated from BLM (Chang et al., 2022), liberal academics, and the Democratic Party (O'Connor, 2020)?

References

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