

„The Focus on Black People Really Helps”

Tommie Shelby on his start in philosophy and the merits of combining liberalism, analytical Marxism, and the Black radical tradition

Tommie Shelby holds the Walter Benjamin Chair 2025 at the Centre for Social Critique. He will deliver the Walter Benjamin Lectures on “Political Ethics of the Oppressed—On Freedom, Solidarity, and Self-Respect”. Centre Directors Rahel Jaeggi and Robin Celikates met with Tommie Shelby to ask him about his particular approach to ethics, philosophy, the Black Radical Tradition, and his plans for the Benjamin Lectures.

Rahel Jaeggi: Tommie, tell us about how you became a philosopher and what philosophy entails for you!

Tommie Shelby: I got interested in philosophy as an undergraduate at Florida A&M University. Being what people call “a first-generation college student” in my family, I went in very practically minded. I was studying in the School of Business and Industry. My perspective was to get a very practical degree and then to try to make some money. But I found a lot of what I was being asked to study boring and I just thought, this will be a really hard life to do this really boring thing just to make money. Then I decided that I was going to open myself up to my college education, to study whatever I was interested in, as I felt that just having a college degree would help me. I did not worry about what I was actually studying anymore. So, I studied lots of different things: sociology, religion, and other kinds of things. I fell into philosophy as a result of that. One of the first classes I took in philosophy was a

course in political philosophy. It was a very traditional, modern political philosophy class in the historical sense. We read Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Mill, Locke, ... people like that. The course captured my imagination. Marx and Mill in particular had a big influence on me, how I think about philosophy, and how I think about political philosophy.

I think a lot of how I approach political questions from a philosophical point of view was really shaped early on with this introduction of the canonical figures in political philosophy and what they were doing. They speak, as philosophers like to do, in very general grand terms, but they are clearly talking about their own time and place, even as they are making more general claims about justice or the legitimacy of the State, or whatever it is. That shapes me too. I do very much talk about the things that confront us now. Even as I am trying to make more general points about how to think about questions of justice, and in particular questions around racial justice, economic justice, criminal justice, and how they interact. Those questions have been preoccupying me for a number of years.

There are lots of political causes that are worthwhile, and some not so worthwhile. Philosophers can have a role to play in clarifying: What are the legitimate aims of such a cause? How does it advance the cause of justice or peace? They can do that in a way that is in dialogue with people who are trying to advance

these various causes or sometimes oppose them. I am talking mostly about general principles rather than concrete strategy or tactics. Yet, it is always meant to identify those general principles that should guide social movements and causes.

Robin Celikates: The engagement with African philosophy and the Black Radical Tradition has been pretty important in your own work over the years. In this tradition, philosophy is understood as having a specific task, maybe even an obligation. In some of your writings, you employ a formulation that is sometimes used in this context: “philosophy born of struggle”. How would you describe this particular background? How did it influence your own conception of philosophy, and also of the relation between philosophy and struggle?

Tommie Shelby: The philosopher Leonard Harris coined the expression “philosophy born of struggle”. He was one of the big influences on me back when I was an undergraduate, thinking about the African American political traditions – there are more than one obviously –, and what philosophical insight is to be found in those traditions. I was also very influenced by Bernard Boxill, Howard McGary, Bill Lawson, and others who were really reflecting on African American history, political life, cultural life and drawing insights from that to think about questions of political philosophy. About 26, 27 years ago, I made a decision that I was going to work in that tradition of African American political philosophy, drawing insights from that tradition, but also reflecting on African American life and its challenges. Within that broader tradition, there is a Black Radical Tradition that is influenced by socialist thought (Marx, obviously, but

even beyond Marx) in thinking about political economy but also trying to take seriously racial domination in the modern world and to see how these things are related. In a sense, I am in that tradition. I did write a dissertation about Marxism. So, I am very, very influenced by that tradition, but also by a tradition that thinks about the modern slave trade and colonialism, and how the race idea operates in that world to expand various forms of imperialist domination within the context of the emergence and spread of capitalism. In that other tradition, I am very influenced for instance by W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright. A lot of my work is taking up the race-class nexus and tries to explain how to understand it from a social theoretical point of view (just explanatory questions), but also from a normative point of view (the ethical point of view), and from the standpoint of political resistance.

Rahel Jaeggi: The race-class nexus also brings us to the topic of solidarity that you have been working on. The non-essentialist idea of solidarity that you put forward is particularly interesting.

Tommie Shelby: My work on solidarity was motivated by an intervention that Kwame Anthony Appiah made in the 1980s in philosophy. He wrote a series of papers and books, some of them engaged with W. E. B. Du Bois, challenging the race idea, or the very idea that there are races. In particular he was interested in whether the use of the race idea in Pan-African thought (you know his father was a Pan-Africanist, and he grew up around this set of ideas) is a proper way to think about the grounds of Pan-African solidarity. Appiah challenged that. In response, some people defended the race idea, reformulating, rethinking it and saying that it does play a role

in understanding identity, understanding solidarity, and understanding social movements against racism. While others wanted to dispense with it. I thought that a lot of the heat around challenging his view, was not motivated by a metaphysical question or a question in biology, but people felt that it was a challenge to two things that really matter to them. That is the legitimacy of thinking of themselves as having a black identity and the legitimacy of solidarity amongst people of African descent or black peoples.

In my book *We Who Are Dark*, I have tried to argue that the race idea was not essential, as people thought, neither to understanding what it meant to have a proper legitimate black identity, nor was it needed to have a basis for black solidarity. What you really need to understand, what is really doing the work and grounding that kind of solidarity, is a common condition. That requires an understanding about what does it mean to be subordinated in a racial order, the mutual identification that emerges from a recognition of that common condition, and a moral commitment to work together, to try to overcome that condition. The real two questions are: What is the nature of this form of subordination? (Not: What is the nature of “race”?) And: What is the nature of that kind of social order that puts you in this subordinate position? Think about the kind of ethical commitment that is involved in not just joining a cause, but seeing yourself as a collective, resisting a social order that holds you at the bottom. Once you understood that, you can see that a lot of debates about the race idea are not really that relevant to it.

Part of my thinking about what it is to have a social identity is to be very pluralist. Maybe

this goes back to the influence of Mill. I am liberal about identity. Your standing in a political collective, engaged in collective resistance, does not depend on us all agreeing on the value and meaning of what it is to be black as an identity. There are lots of different ways of being black in the world, lots of different ways of thinking about human flourishing that embrace the idea of being black in the world. But those disagreements need not undermine a collective resistance to a form of subordination that we all share.

Robin Celikates: You also have described your own position as Afro-analytical Marxism which is again a fascinating concept to highlight that the Marxist impulse and the impulses from the Black Radical Tradition really have to be thought together. Could you say a bit more about how you understand that category, how it enables you to use Du Bois, Richard Wright, and others who have also had a strong interest in and commitment to Marxism, and combine them with your own theoretical interest in these issues of solidarity, justice and freedom?

Tommie Shelby: Afro-analytical Marxism is a label I am trying out. I do not know that many people would accept it as a label for what they do. Charles Mills might have accepted some version of it. Maybe we are the only two people to have worked under this label. Afro-analytical Marxism is partly having thought about Marx in a certain way. I am very influenced by G. A. Cohen’s work in political philosophy and the way he approached thinking about Marxism as a social and political tradition of thought. Cohen de-emphasized a methodological, esoteric approach. He did not see the heart of Marxist thought as a matter of having some distinctive method but rather saw it in

the concrete theoretical claims that are being made about our world. Once you view it like that, which not all people in that tradition do, then there is a project of trying to clarify and assess the central theoretical claims that are made, being ruthless about which parts are worth continuing to defend, and which parts it would be better to either radically revise or to depart from and abandon.

There are things that some people who think of themselves as Marxists believe are essential to being a Marxist. This probably puts me at odds with them, because a lot of the things that are most important to Marx, I do not believe. I am coming out of a tradition that sees that critical reflection on the core ideas as really important. Such a tradition is alive, and I think that is how Marx thought of it. It is not a set of codified doctrines that you must accept, but more a certain way of thinking about freedom, capitalism, and collective struggle.

I take the same approach to the African American political tradition or the Black Radical Tradition. It is a very vital tradition to me, very important, but I do not treat any of it as sacred. There are lots of things people believe in that tradition that I might be skeptical of. Some of the things they think are probably ambiguous or vague in ways that I think a philosopher could help clarifying, and I try to do that work about solidarity as we just discussed. The marriage, if you like, between these traditions is partly driven by a certain way of thinking as an analytically minded philosopher who is not alienated from the mainstream social sciences, not alienated from the kind of careful analytical reflection and attention to logical inference, and so on, that is characteristic of the analytical philosophical approach. Embracing those is not antithetical

to these political commitments, but a part of it, and it reaches out both into a living Marxist tradition and a living black political tradition that takes seriously both the issues of class and capitalism and issues of racial domination and exploitation.

Rahel Jaeggi: This already leads us to the ethics of the oppressed. What are you going to do in the Walter Benjamin Lectures?

Tommie Shelby: When I think about the African American political tradition, I do not think of those key figures as taking up some of the classic questions on political philosophy that are mostly about “What is a truly just society?” or “How do you understand legitimacy of the state?” I think its contributions are mostly around moral questions about how to live under conditions of oppression and what the values and principles are that should guide one in living and in resisting forms of oppression. Most of that tradition, including Du Bois, is reflecting on what it means if you are living (and this is why, in some ways the focus on black people really helps) in a context where a truly multiracial democracy is not on the horizon. A truly multiracial democracy is not something that we are likely to see anytime soon. It is worth aspiring for, of course, and trying to bring about, but you do not expect it. You expect that it will take some time, probably generations, to achieve it. But in the meantime, you have to live a life. And there are different ways of living a life. You can live a life in a way where you are just cynical, focus on eking out whatever you can from an oppressive existence, and try to find some bit of meaning in that, or you could see yourself as being really opposed to the social order. In the latter case, you are ethically committed to do something about the oppression, while at

the same time trying to think about what it means to live in a dignified way under these conditions, to try to find some sense of moral purpose within it. A lot of what the African American political tradition has to contribute is around that set of questions. And what I want to do is think about those questions. I am particularly interested in thinking about the place of intellectual and artistic freedom within such a life. How do you think about what it means to be a free-thinking person who expresses an aesthetic point of view under these kinds of conditions, where people might be skeptical of the value of doing that. Or they might think that it can potentially undermine a political cause. I wanted to think about these precious freedoms that some of us are able to exercise, but many are not. What is the place of that within the political ethics of oppressed people?

I use Richard Wright, who reflected on this at great length in a lot of his work in both his literary fiction and his numerous works of non-fiction and autobiographical reflections. He is wrestling with that set of questions as a person who was initially in the Communist party, and loudly left the party, but saw himself as still very much committed to the cause that the party represented for him. The leaving of the party is about the way in which he thought it did not respect individuality and freedom of expression and freedom of thought. That made it an intolerable political group to be a part of.

I use Wright, his own reflections, and of course, my own to wrestle with this set of questions about the place of liberty within the broader political ethics of the oppressed and that leads into some questions about things I have reflected on in the past.

One has to do with solidarity: The place of solidarity obviously requires a commitment to objectives and values of those who are collectively working together to try to bring about better conditions. That is the sense of loyalty that is required for that. To be effective can sometimes be in tension with the forms of individual freedom that some people would find very precious and important to them. I am interested in thinking about that tension between the role of individuality and the individual freedom within an ethic of collective solidarity. I am also interested in the question of self-respect where forms of resistance people engage in are not best understood as attempts to improve conditions or change conditions. Instead, some of these modes of resistance are more symbolic or communicative. They are meant to register dissent, defiance, and a refusal to just go along, even if that does not necessarily lead to making things better or bringing about a more just society. But it is a form of ethical or political self-assertion that is important for oppressed people to engage in.

There are still some questions there about how it fits within a good life, what you can really demand of people or what you can reasonably expect from others when you say: this is an undignified way of living as an oppressed person. Concerns that lead to such demands or expectations are that the way some people are living could potentially hurt the group because of whether it feeds into a stereotype, whether it communicates a sense of resignation in the face of injustice, or whether it elicits a repressive response. All these things can potentially be very harmful to the collective. But there is still a question about to what extent can an individual rightly, justifiably engage in them nonetheless, as a matter of affirming

their sense of self-respect. I want to reflect on this set of questions, largely taking the case of African Americans especially living under Jim Crow as a case study.

Robin Celikates: Could one then say that there are three sides to the ethics of the oppressed? First, the side that you discussed in your book *Dark Ghettos*, about the political obligations that the oppressed might be under, understanding that they are different if they are oppressed from those members of the political community who are not oppressed or not in the same way oppressed. Second, ethical questions that come up in terms of how the oppressed relate to other fellow citizens and to the State under whose authority they are. Third, the question that you now brought up and discussed, about the self-relation, the question of dignity and of self-respect. And that includes the question of solidarity, the relation to others in the community of the oppressed, what the ethical norms governing those relations are. As you pointed out, they can all come into conflict with each other. Is that the way you would understand that? And a second question: You mentioned Jim Crow, what do you think are contexts today in which these questions are pressing?

Tommie Shelby: Yes, the way you describe it is the way I think of it. Let me emphasize that people interpret a lot of black political thought as a series of debates about strategy and I am resistant to that as a way of thinking about what that tradition is really about. Talk of strategy assumes a shared goal, and I think that tends to hide the disagreement about fundamental objectives. People do disagree about, what is the good and just society, what are we ultimately trying to bring about. It also tends to displace some of the ethical questi-

ons about how to live. What is a morally defensible way of trying to bring about change or resisting your oppression? I am interested in those questions, primarily.

I have spent a lot of time, as I said, preoccupied with the race-class nexus. Ghetto poverty is one kind of case that I have thought a lot about, which is a post Jim Crow phenomenon for the most part. It has to do with the migration of people from the southern part of the United States during the Jim Crow period to the industrializing North, Midwest, and West part of the country. As people went to the cities in those places, leaving the rural South, they ultimately faced a new form of subordination that you could call “ghettoization”. I am interested in the experience of people living in and around major cities and segregated places where there is a high concentration of disadvantage. These people are disadvantaged in multiple ways, not just in terms of employment or education, but wealth, political power, and so on. They are very marginalized in these places, and have very little power to try to change things. They are a subgroup of the broader black population. And in some ways, they are a minority, but an important minority. There are a range of tensions that arise broadly because of the existence of this very marginalized subgroup and the existence of people like me, who are the elites within the group, who are more fluent and have a lot more power, influence, and status within society. Some of the questions around political ethics of the oppressed arise internal to that very marginalized group. How are they to live? They feel like they face a police state, and they overwhelmingly find themselves vulnerable to incarceration and to marginalization within the economy, where there is very little work, at least very little dignified

work for them. But then, how are they supposed to position themselves, with respect to the country as a whole, and how do they position themselves with respect to the more advantaged members of their broader group of black Americans? I am very interested in that set of issues.

And from the other side: How do people like me, people who are part of the professional managerial class, relate to the members who are worst off in the group? How do you have solidarity across such a huge divide? In terms of not just our material life prospects, but in terms of status and other kinds of things. In terms of contemporary issues in the political ethics of the oppressed, that is the set of issues that I typically think about. Still, thinking about Jim Crow is helpful. It is a little cleaner example. It is historical. It ends in 1960s. This helps to clarify some of the issues, because there is this understanding of what that was, a regime of racial domination that lasted almost a hundred years. You can reflect on questions about political ethics of the oppressed against the background of that. In some ways, it is a little easier than taking up the contemporary issues that arise.

Rahel Jaeggi: I am also curious about the way you want to bring in Richard Wright’s novels and thoughts. How are you going to interweave philosophical, analytical tools and concepts with interpreting literature?

Tommie Shelby: This is the thing I have been thinking about for a bit. If you want to draw insights from the black political tradition you have to be open to a range of genres of writing or even other broader modes of expression. They might even include the visual arts, though I am not going to do that. Du Bois

was an academic, and of course he can write in an academic tone, but a lot of the figures in the tradition who are most influential do not write a treatise or an essay in a traditional scholarly way. Maybe they do not even write political pamphlets or anything like that. But they often express themselves in other genres of writing. Sometimes that is in autobiography or memoir, sometimes that is in poetry, sometimes that is in fiction. I think it is very difficult to take that tradition seriously, if you are not willing to engage these other ways of writing. I do not think that puts me out of step with the broader Western philosophical tradition. A lot of philosophers have done the same. They have written using literature or autobiography and more oracular, more poetic modes of expression. I do not think it is an unusual thing to do. It is just that in the case of the black political tradition, it is characteristic of the modes of expression that it takes these other forms. That requires trying to draw out some of the philosophical moral lessons that are not always put forward as rigorous linear argumentation.

The nice thing about Wright is that he was deeply interested in philosophy and very interested in existentialism. In particular, he was good friends with Sartre and Beauvoir. He was an expatriate who moved to France and was a part of that larger community influenced by Camus and others. He is best understood in that tradition of existentialism and phenomenology which is not exactly my tradition. He even wrote an existentialist novel, *The Outsider*, to explore his philosophical ideas in fiction. I am also interested in the role of autobiography and memoir, which I think has been very critical in the black tradition, from the slave narrative onwards. Frederick Douglass wrote three autobiographies. The moral lessons are

drawn from stories he tells about his own life. He wrote essays, too, and he is a great orator, but the mode of giving voice to a moral vision, to a diagnosis of the times, to a sense of what our ethical obligations are to one another, or to what it means to live a dignified life, those get expressed in the form of memoir, of autobiography. Many of the major figures in the tradition wrote books like that.

And so, I felt I needed to take that seriously. I am doing that in the lectures, take a book like *Black Boy*, Wright's autobiography, or the excerpt of its second part that was called *American Hunger*, and read it philosophically. Wright is mostly famous for writing *Black Boy* and his first novel, *Native Son*. But I think some of the other work he did is just as important, like his first short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, which I have written about before and will revisit. They are important for the kind of questions I want to raise. The last book, *The Long Dream*, revisits a lot of the questions that were raised in *Uncle Tom's Children*, and I think he changes his mind about some things. That challenges things that I have thought about the political ethics of the oppressed. For instance, some of the things that might have seemed harsh ethical requirements on the oppressed as expressed in *Uncle Tom's Children* seem less demanding when you get to *The Long Dream*, and I am interested in why that is so. There will be some interpretation of fictional works, autobiographical works, but also some nonfiction works. He also wrote a lot about African decolonization movements. He wrote a lot about African-Asian solidarity in response to imperialism, legible to philosophers as nonfiction works, so those will come up as well.

Robin Celikates: Well, that is great. I think it is already clear how rich this topic and Wright

as an author is. Thanks so much, Tommie, for taking the time.

Tommie Shelby: My pleasure. I am really looking forward to it.