AWAKENING TO RACE: INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICA

Jack Turner. *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. The election of America’s first black president has led many to believe that race is no longer a real obstacle to success and that remaining racial inequality stems largely from the failure of minority groups to take personal responsibility for seeking out opportunities. Often this argument is made in the name of the long tradition of self-reliance and American individualism. In *Awakening to Race*, Jack Turner upends this view, arguing that it expresses not a deep commitment to the values of individualism, but a narrow understanding of them.

Drawing on the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, Turner offers an original reconstruction of democratic individualism in American thought. All these thinkers, he shows, held that personal responsibility entails a refusal to be complicit in injustice and a duty to combat the conditions and structures that support it. At a time when individualism is invoked as a reason for inaction, Turner makes the individualist tradition the basis of a bold and impassioned case for race consciousness—consciousness of the ways that race continues to constrain opportunity in America. Turner’s “new individualism” becomes the grounds for concerted public action against racial injustice.

People Involved: Jack Turner III
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