

## Book reviews

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Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016. 352 pp. ISBN 9780674970502, \$29.95 (hbk)

**Reviewed by:** Michael S. Merry, *University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

It is rare to find a book in political philosophy whose arguments successfully utilize both ideal *and* non-ideal theory. Rarer still does one find a book in political philosophy that takes seriously the proposition that the oppressed are not merely passive victims to injustice, but rather rational and moral agents, capable of making meaningful and informed choices concerning those things they have reason to value. *Dark Ghettos* does both. In this book, Tommie Shelby develops a number of new and provocative arguments for establishing a more just society. His unremitting focus on the ‘basic structure’ puts him firmly in the Rawlsian camp. But Shelby is no ordinary Rawlsian, and *Dark Ghettos* is no ordinary political analysis. Labeling himself an ‘egalitarian pluralist’, he examines the challenges of ghetto poverty through a very hybrid theoretical lens, one incorporating feminist, Black nationalist, and Marxist principles. And, in addressing his principled arguments to the concerns of Black people, Shelby continues a long conversation among Black intellectuals dating back to the nineteenth century. Indeed, one hears echoes of DuBois but also Delany, Garvey, Newton, Boxill, and Wilson among others.

*Dark Ghettos* defends a number of bold, counterintuitive proposals. For instance, Shelby critiques the widespread notion of ‘deadbeat dads’ in the ghetto by arguing that a just society ought to ‘move away from a paternity conception of moral fatherhood’ (p. 168); he criticizes a work regime that serves as ‘a veiled expression of contempt for black citizens’ (p. 200); and he argues that the State may lack the moral authority to condemn disobedience to its laws (p. 244). But for many readers perhaps the most controversial position he takes, given the scholarly consensus for more than half a century, is that segregation ought to be viewed in morally neutral terms. Whether or not segregation is a bad thing, he argues, will depend not on the composition of a particular neighborhood but rather on whether or not the basic requirements of justice are absent. In other words, he rejects liberal reforms that stigmatize Black space, and, using the same pernicious logic, aim to disrupt Black communities. Rather than assuming that the problem is with Black space, Shelby reminds us that the real problem lies elsewhere: first, with a prevailing racist ideology that stigmatizes blackness and, second, with its unjust material effects. The problem, in other words, is with the institutionally racist – and hence unjust – social and political structure that we inhabit and maintain.

With respect to the idea that justice requires racial integration, Shelby takes the opposite view:

If integration requires that blacks relinquish the benefits of self-segregation, endure the increased white hostility and interracial conflict that often accompanies integration, and, in order to have equal life prospects, work their way into white social networks, then blacks have just grounds for complaint. Blacks, as an unjustly disadvantaged group, should be the ones to decide if forgoing the returns to social capital that integration might provide is worth it to them. Policies that seek to end unjust racial inequality by pushing, or even nudging, blacks into residential integration or that make needed resources available only on condition that blacks are willing to integrate show a lack of respect for those they aim to assist. In response to such reform efforts blacks would be justified in refusing to move out of black communities – whether these be ghettos or not – as a form of political dissent. (p. 75)

Furthermore, he observes, residential integration, rather than leading to greater harmony, often leads to greater racial *conflict*. Indeed, integration as defined and imposed by others is a failure to demonstrate respect. Shelby is not *against* integration but rather against the additional burdens imposed on the oppressed that forced integration entails. Rather than artificially engineering ‘multiracial or mixed-income neighborhoods in the name of national unity’ (p. 79), he argues instead that ‘the goals of corrective justice can be achieved without [it]’. It is more consistent with corrective justice to offer ghetto denizens the options of staying put while also working toward urban community development. ‘Such urban planning’, he writes, ‘should include the ghetto poor in the decision making, not leaving these community matters to politicians, more advantaged residents, and private developers. Then the ghetto poor would really have a meaningful choice’ (p. 76). By making the case that good local jobs, affordable housing, and better quality schools should not depend upon the presence of non-Blacks, Shelby again is calling attention to the need for a just basic structure. And by focusing on the basic structure, he is able to call for ‘ghetto abolitionism’ in the same breath that he defends the legitimacy of the Black neighborhood.

Throughout the book, Shelby rejects what he calls the ‘medical reform model’, a liberal tendency that pathologizes the poor in general and the Black ghetto poor in particular. Rather than blame the poor for their problems, he insists we ought to recognize the complicity of the state – and society generally – in the social injustices largely responsible for poverty and disadvantage (p. 143). And the problems are not merely with incorrectly diagnosing ghetto poverty. Given the State’s potential to aggravate harm, but also the probability of implicit racism in the paternalist gesture, there are serious moral constraints on what institutions, and paternalistic actors, are permitted to do. It is therefore not sufficient to ‘act on behalf of the unjustly disadvantaged’ (p. 113). ‘As has so often been true in human history’, he writes, ‘the oppressed must play a large role – sometimes they have to be the principal agents – in ending the unjust practices they are subjected to’ (p. 222). Even incentives, when they are conditionally offered to the poor, ‘[can] be morally troubling’ (p. 93) inasmuch as much moral reform ‘attacks the ghetto poor’s social bases of self-esteem and fails to honor their need to preserve self-respect’ (p. 100).

Shelby does not let ghetto denizens off the hook; ‘the ghetto poor, like the rest of us, have moral duties to others that are not voided because of unjust social conditions’ (p. 110). State interventions in the ghetto may also be legitimate when their aim is to

protect the innocent – such as children and the elderly – from harm. Culpable actions by ghetto denizens should therefore ‘be discouraged and sometimes punished’ (p. 276). And of course some imprudent actions of the ghetto poor exacerbate their plight. Yet Shelby argues that some actions should be viewed as moral responses to injustice. Indeed, in order to maintain a healthy sense of self-respect under conditions of injustice, ‘the oppressed may therefore fight back against their oppressors, demanding the justice they know they deserve, even when the available evidence suggests that justice is not on the horizon. They thereby affirm their moral worth and equal status’ (p. 99). In concrete terms, Shelby suggests that fighting oppression may entail that poor Black men are morally justified in refusing to pay state-imposed child support, or the ghetto poor may be morally justified in refusing to work in low-paying and stigmatized employment, or finally, the ghetto poor may be morally justified in violating certain property rights claims.

In the final chapter, Shelby offers an analysis of what he calls ‘impure dissent’ in hip hop music and culture. The dissent is ‘impure’, he tells us, insofar as its messages may also contain homophobia, sexism and other problematic beliefs and behaviors. And while of course not all hip-hop exemplifies impure dissent, he insists that there are three ways in which it does: by affirming self-respect, by pledging loyalty to the oppressed, and by withholding loyalty from the state (p. 268). Refusing to exhibit respect for the police, the education system or the courts, for instance, can serve as a kind of ‘symbolic dissent’ which may not offer much in the way of a ‘solution’ to the problems besetting the ghetto poor but which nevertheless expresses displeasure, even moral outrage, at the injustice of an institutional structure that exacerbates – rather than ameliorates – the conditions afflicting the ghetto poor.

*Dark Ghettos* does not cover all the relevant terrain for a just basic structure. Both health and education are conspicuous by their absence. And thus Shelby’s arguments for ‘meaningful reform’ within the domains of reproduction, family and work seem to me rather improbable so long as the present injustices of the health and education systems remain as they are. But the book’s merits far outweigh these omissions. His principled arguments are well informed by empirical research. This enables him to ground his theory in reliable observations about the realities of the ghetto, rather than citing research that only corroborates the case one wishes to make, or else positing wildly unfeasible ‘solutions’ to ghetto poverty. I therefore welcome this radical philosophical work – one that articulates and extends the aims of Black nationalism – in particular as it concerns the agency of the oppressed, the importance of dissent in parallel publics, and both the personal and societal imperative of self-respect in fostering collective resistance.

Tone Kvernbekk, *Evidence-Based Practice in Education: Functions of Evidence and Causal Presuppositions*. Routledge, Oxon, 2016. 202 pp. ISBN 9780415839099, \$135 (hbk)

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In debates about complex matters, there is a tendency for the positions of academics on the rival sides to ossify: difficulties in their own positions are simplified or overlooked,