

Political Feasibility and Justice

“The ghetto should be abolished.” So reads the opening sentence to the epilogue of the philosopher Tommie Shelby’s *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. The book sees Shelby use philosophy as a tool to explore issues of racial justice, focusing in particular on neighborhoods that he calls “ghettos,” spaces of concentrated black disadvantage. And yet, despite the urgent tone that Shelby often uses to talk about these issues, as embodied by the above quote, considerations of feasibility — that is, what will actually work to alleviate the burdens of the oppressed — are largely undiscussed. This dismissiveness explicitly surfaces in the chapter “Community,” where Shelby states that the only grounds he can see for supporting residential integration is political feasibility: “which is *not*,” as he writes, “a requirement of justice but rather a compromise with injustice.”¹ While Shelby mounts a number of valid critiques against the necessity of integration, and does not spend too much time on the concept of political feasibility, I want to focus my attention on this particular claim. Using concepts internal to Shelby’s own argument, I assert that, in fact, he should not have negated the importance of political feasibility.

Three key concepts underlie Shelby’s framework for *Dark Ghettos*: the basic structure, the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, and justice as reciprocity. Shelby uses the term “basic structure” to describe the ways that major institutions like markets, the government, and

¹ Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 77.

the legal system organize social cooperation.² Shelby focuses on the basic structure to avoid falling into what he calls the “medical model”: treating social problems like poverty as isolated issues that can be diagnosed and then fixed with targeted programs, and not as symptoms of much larger, structural injustices.³ He also explicitly situates *Dark Ghettos* within the “nonideal” canon of philosophy; unlike ideal theory, the branch of philosophy that defines the principles that should be used to guide a perfectly just society, nonideal theory trades in the principles that should be used to guide responses to injustice.⁴ The fact that a distinction exists at all between ideal and nonideal theory implies that different sets of principles should be used. What may be a justifiable principle in the context of a utopia could appear nonsensical or impossible to justify within the context of a deeply unjust society. Finally, Shelby’s argument relies on an understanding of “justice as reciprocity.” Defining justice as reciprocity, Shelby argues, lets us imagine societal obligations both in terms of what society gives us — perhaps equality of opportunity, access to healthcare, protection from crime — and in terms of what we owe society in return — paying taxes and obeying the law, for example.⁵ A just society is one where both entities keep up their end of the bargain.

In the second chapter of the book, Shelby draws on these three concepts to argue against the idea that social justice requires residential integration. This part of the book is firmly nonideal, as the primary question Shelby explores is how to think about segregated, disadvantaged black neighborhoods — clearly a response to an injustice. Opposing those who think residential integration is necessary to realize social justice, Shelby posits that integration would actually entail black people taking on a large burden. Black people are justified in seeking

² Ibid., 20

³ Ibid., 2

⁴ Ibid., 11-12

⁵ Ibid., 20

out black communities, and avoiding the potential hostility of mostly white neighborhoods.⁶ Given that the government has systematically oppressed black Americans for generations, black people do not owe it anything, including a willingness to integrate, under the framework of justice as reciprocity.⁷ Moreover, Shelby says, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with homogeneous neighborhoods; what most people find objectionable about segregation is the associated lack of resources in black communities.⁸ Instead of hoping integration will indirectly lessen economic inequality, we should instead focus on abolishing class hierarchy altogether and make more radical changes at the structural level.⁹ This argument allows him to conclude that potential political feasibility, which he does not think is a requirement of justice, could be the only merit of residential integration.¹⁰

Shelby's focus on the basic structure of society and his placement in nonideal theory demand that he take the issue of political feasibility more seriously. The kinds of deep structural changes Shelby advocates for are undoubtedly a worthwhile goal. But the very structures that have resulted in concentrated black poverty form the context in which these changes would have to take place — an outcome that is highly unlikely, if not impossible. If injustice stems from the fact that unjust systems govern the country, it seems as though a truly nonideal theory, which is supposed to deal in responses to injustice, would explore the ways in which reform efforts would, by necessity, have to work within the dominant structure. The basic structure, after all, refers in part to systems put in place by the government. If Shelby is going to focus on the ways in which the government has structurally deprived black people of certain rights and economic opportunities, he must also reckon with the governmental structures that are set up to impede

⁶ Ibid., 74

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 63, 74

⁹ Ibid., 77, 79

¹⁰ Ibid., 77

radical progress: making the types of reform he has in mind seem out of touch with reality, though they may be just in the abstract.

Moreover, Shelby's core concept of justice as reciprocity may in fact require politically feasible reforms that are imperfect when the alternative is inaction. Action is what marks the fulfillment of reciprocity. It would not seem to be reciprocal if, say, a citizen broke a law that undermined the basic structure (such as corruption) even if they did not intend to. Nor would it be reciprocal if an institution had the intention of keeping up their end of the deal (distributing welfare or social security, for example) but did not follow through. In other sections of the book, Shelby uses the notion of reciprocity to argue that disadvantaged black people are not obligated to perform actions that uphold the basic structure, and may therefore be permitted to not work certain kinds of jobs, or obey all laws.¹¹ But he does not grapple with the fact that the majority of black people living in poverty, whether obligated to or not, actually do uphold the basic structure of American society. Using Shelby's own framework, it would seem as if they are owed something under justice as reciprocity. The very fact that they are owed something necessitates foregrounding political feasibility in the quest for justice; for only certain types of reforms can be enacted given current conditions, and can therefore be considered examples of real action.

Political philosophy must reckon with politics if it is to have any use in correcting injustice. If we agree with Shelby — that we should foreground the basic structure, structure, understand justice as reciprocity, and use nonideal theory as a tool — reforms like residential integration that can be proven to have success in alleviating black disadvantage, and also have a high chance of being politically enacted, should not be considered “a compromise with injustice.”¹² Though Shelby critiques policymakers that conceive of injustice as separate social

¹¹ Ibid., 200, 219

¹² Ibid., 77

ills that may be diagnosed and then solved, his refrain of fixing the basic structure sounds less like a realistic goal and more like a miracle cure. Racial and economic injustice are grave and urgent problems. While questions of what justice should look like are essential in addressing them, they should not be placed above questions regarding what justice can actually look like, given the institutions that created them.

Works Cited

Shelby, Tommie. *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.