



Book Review: Dark Ghettos by Tommie Shelby (2016)

Shaan Amin¹, Chloé Blyth² and Jai Patel³

¹Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: s.r.amin@lse.ac.uk

²Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: c.a.blyth@lse.ac.uk

³Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: j.patel16@lse.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

Abolition of the ghetto. Shelby will settle for nothing else. In a damning critique of the 'medical models' typical of the Davos elite, Tommie Shelby rejects the view that the plight of the Black urban poor can be 'fixed' by the bitter medicine of technocracy, an almost *medical* approach. If it was so easy to run regressions, collect data, write cheques and churn out legislation, why does racial injustice persist with all its moral outrage? Why do statues get toppled? Why does part of the human race still have to scream that *their lives matter*? Shelby astutely centres the phenomena around deeper questions of basic structures, justice and morality uncharacteristic of the broader literature. He responds to gripping questions about the moral permissibility of criminality, nonwork, parental responsibility and governmental interventions which are sure to raise eyebrows in his unique attempt to empower the ghetto poor as agents of their own liberation. In a stagnant discourse desperate for change, the sophistication of his radical - not always credible - analysis is alone potently refreshing. It equips policymakers, academics and, perhaps, laypeople with fundamentally new tools to appreciate that they are all - inescapably - stakeholders, and that nothing less than ghetto abolitionism will suffice.

2. Literature review

It would be easy to see Shelby's work as one of armchair philosophising, of seeing the world as a place to 'carve up' with some tactful analytic philosophy. But Shelby resists and moderates the extremes in this discourse. The literature around the Black American 'ghetto poor' and racialized poverty, as Shelby convincingly identifies, seems to be dominated by technocratic policy prescriptions. On the other hand, philosophical works of justice and

morality also seem to diverge from reality, and the lack of empirical findings in Shelby's work may produce the charge that his words are of little practical relevance. A synthesis of the two is desperately needed. The Rawlsian framework has been the predominant and closest way of carefully combining theory with normative prescriptions and political action, as ideal theory. This framework asks, what does a society without ghettos look like? What is the optimal societal structure? Shelby builds firmly on this tradition but avoids accusations of Utopianism by balancing his analysis with nonideal theory, delineating the transition to ghetto abolition. This embraces reality with its contradictions and imperfections and sets out guidance on the moral permissibility of actions needed to achieve justice. It asks, how do we get there? He enriches the dominant Rawlsian model with notions of reciprocity, the moral agency of the ghetto poor and carefully prescribes action even in seemingly banal or irrelevant areas: rap music; sex lives; parenting; and precision dissent.

In conceptually mapping out ideal and non-ideal theory, Laura Valentini (2012) illustrates how the two answer different questions. While Shelby emphasises that his work is one that is focused on the 'real world' and is as such a nonideal, it does appear that he presupposes certain concepts of ideal justice which would be more helpful if he had made them more explicit. Nonetheless, the work does serve the function of answering the 'why' and the 'how'. It is clear that Shelby's greatest strength is that regardless of the content of his work, simply by diverging from sensationalist and superficial works such as Sachs' *'The End of Poverty'* (2005), he expands the scope of the discipline to deeper normative considerations, allowing us to better appreciate the tragic phenomenon in its entirety. Even works such as Thomas J. Sugrue's *'The Origins of the Urban Crisis'* (2014) or Baradaran's *'The Colour of Money'* (2017), both of which racialize poverty, try to explain problems by giving a historical account of economic events, which seem trivial insofar as they just *reflect* systemic injustice without picking it apart with surgical analysis. Shelby takes on the mammoth task of integrating disciplines and methodologies in an overarching moral prescription, without sacrificing precision, and seems to succeed in a way reminiscent of Du Bois.

3. Summary

Shelby's choice of title is an unmistakable reference to Kenneth Clark's (1965) namesake *'Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power'*. It must deeply pain Shelby to note that issues addressed by Clark more than fifty years ago, specifically the obstacles to upward mobility that face the black poor, are still pertinent today. Therefore, this modernised intervention is acutely aware of its responsibility to offer something different, something refreshing. It is clear that the 'medical model' has run its course; policymakers cannot view the ghetto as an isolated problem in an otherwise effective social system, one that merely requires a cost-effective solution that keeps the engine running. What is our alternative? According to Shelby, we need to adopt a systemic-injustice framework. This way of thinking seeks to reframe the discussion about ghetto poverty into a moral consideration of whether the fundamental social structures behind its existence are just. Having outlined our planned destination, Shelby divides the book into three parts that neatly progress his thesis.

In the first part of the book, Shelby addresses *residential integration* and *cultural reform*. Firstly, new integrationists, those who encourage residential integration as a means of alleviating ghetto poverty, ignore the ethical and practical obstacles they face. Forced integration can be seen as a neglect of appropriate consideration for the dignity and self-respect of ghetto residents. Shelby addresses a plethora of reasons for which black people may themselves wish to live in segregated communities. These range from a positive desire to live in a black neighbourhood to even a precautionary preference to avoid potential racial conflict and persecution that could accompany integrated communities. Instead, corrective justice can be achieved without the need for forced integration, perhaps through urban community development or economically empowering residents. Shelby then proceeds to criticise another prevailing argument that attempts to explain the persistence of the ghetto: the *cultural divergence thesis*. According to this theory, a disproportionate number of ghetto residents espouse values, practices and attitudes that diverge sharply from the mainstream to the extent that their life prospects are negatively affected. Some may go as far as to argue that such divergences can be corrected through a risk-reward system of behavioural rehabilitation. Shelby critiques this argument in a similar vein to the new integrationists, contending that such a stance directly contradicts the core Rawlsian (1971) ideal of respect for persons. *Liberal egalitarian theory* fundamentally seeks to preserve individual liberties and, therefore, ghetto residents should be afforded the freedom to change their perspectives through the less interventionist means of rational persuasion.

Within Part II of the book, Shelby presents several distinct issues that contribute to the perpetuation of the ghetto, and in turn he demonstrates why medical model solutions have failed to identify the structural injustice prevalent. He begins with a focus on the reproductive choices of ghetto residents, exploring the *Reproductive Responsibility Principle (RRP)* promoted by James Woodward (1986). The RRP states that when considering the possibility of raising a child, one should ensure that they are able to fulfil the obligations this would entail. Rather than considering such obligations in depth, Shelby focusses on refuting welfare policies that deter violation of the RRP, such as requirements to work. Imposing upon ghetto-residing mothers the condition of menial labour in order to live a minimally acceptable life amounts to coercion and is a violation of the fundamental freedoms that accompany a just society. Subsequently, Shelby moves his attention to the problem of single-parent families, making the controversial argument that the ultimate responsibility for pregnancy lies with the mother. Assuming that women have the facility of abortion available to them, they bear the ultimate power to decide whether sexual intercourse will necessarily result in childbirth. However, the assumption of access to abortion is a considerable one, and Shelby also fails to consider the morally objectionable, yet legal, means through which women may be coerced into having sex, such as under the threat of eviction by a landlord. Joblessness is another issue that plagues the ghetto; Shelby questions the appropriateness of state-enforced work programmes, arguing that there are cases where voluntary joblessness may allow ghetto residents to express dissatisfaction with their unjust low standing in American society. This serves as a convenient transition towards the third and final part of the book.

The pervasiveness of crime within the ghetto is given a similar interpretation to joblessness, and it becomes clear that Part III shall advance the kernel of Shelby's argument; certain forms of legal disobedience, labelled '*impure dissent*', should be seen as a morally

permissible means of resistance to the structural injustice that pervades American society. Shelby's non-ideal argument subsequently proceeds to address theories of punishment. He argues that the state's failure to ensure the basic structures of a just society is so catastrophic that it lacks any moral authority to condemn actions of impure dissent. Hip-hop music, shoplifting and tax evasion, all examples of impure dissent, allow ghetto residents to express support for their fellow oppressed, to withhold their allegiances from the state and, crucially, to reaffirm the self-respect that they deserve. Such actions, blameworthy in any other context, may not offer much in terms of a practical solution, but they play a vital role in the political ethics of those who are afflicted by the systemic injustices of the ghetto.

4. Critical Analysis

Throughout the book, one cannot help but notice several inconsistencies and contradictions. Those that we discuss later mostly affect the reading of the book from an academic perspective, leaving its essence unaffected for the average reader. This is important as this book largely contributes to reviving discussions surrounding the existence of ghettos and the persistence of racial injustice. We first look at problems regarding *Dark Ghettos*'s audience. The book itself targets no specific audience. Shelby appears to address not only the privileged in society and the victims of the unjust basic structure, but also policymakers and politicians, all within the confines of a single text. It is in addressing this wide-ranging audience that we identify some initial inconsistencies. The language used is technocratic, complex, and at times, patronising. The style is conducive insofar as Shelby seeks to reinvigorate the academic debate. However, as most of his analysis is centred on agency and empowering individuals as opposed to a top-down approach, it seems odd that his style doesn't adopt a layman slant to make his radical call for empowerment more accessible. We note however that his extensive and systematic operationalisation of terms (often laid out in the first pages of each chapter) is necessary as many of the terms used in academia around social justice can be taken to mean different things in everyday contexts. This isn't something he could have easily omitted. Nevertheless, the language and style may mean that Shelby's work will not find resonance with some of his intended audience groups, namely ghetto residents themselves.

Furthermore, the audience most aptly prepared to read *Dark Ghettos* could find themselves frustrated with the way Shelby rests his philosophical arguments upon empirical claims that he rarely justifies. Shelby often draws his conclusions from assumptions that he takes as exogenous in his philosophical frameworks. He does not clearly state them at times, further jeopardising the book's potential as a general guide to abolishing ghettos. Shelby generally identifies a type of popular reactionary criticism of the denizens of the dark ghetto, for example that unemployment in the ghetto is so high primarily because those living there refuse to take available jobs. In issuing his response, namely that the choice of non-work can be justified against a background of injustice and exploitation, Shelby does not provide any supporting data or literature. In particular, his last chapter 'Dissent', which discusses the meaning and implications of hip hop music and urban culture is more a show of his personal opinion on the matter rather than a discussion of any formal findings. It is not the most convincing chapter and perhaps could have benefitted from being placed elsewhere than at

the end of the book. On the other hand, Shelby's structure gives us alternatives to entertain and fundamentally rebalances the discourse.

Shelby also runs into some contradictions when trying to separate the contribution of the state and social structures to oppression and the agency of the individual. Is Shelby a committed Rawlsian? He certainly appears to be on the surface, but at times we find him to be guilty of his own standards. On the one hand he criticises perpetrators of the unjust blind spot problem for rushing to judgement over the behaviour of alienated ghetto residents. According to Rawlsian principles, we cannot make hasty judgments over the motives and intentions of fellow individuals. As such Shelby adopts an inherently deterministic viewpoint of the fate of the ghetto poor, condemned to their mode of existence because of the systemic unjust basic structure of US society. However, Shelby makes a big point throughout of highlighting the moral responsibility of ghetto residents through the principle of self determination. In so doing he ascribes to the ghetto poor individual agency he previously maintained would not help them in escaping their condition. He puts forward an argument for justified resistance by explaining the actions of such individuals as a form of political expression and excuses unlawful actions as an expression of discontent with the status-quo. There seems to be a fine line between the two; surely this necessitates making a non-Rawlsian assumption as to the intention of these people? Hence Shelby tends to treat those faced with injustice as passive victims rather than potential contributors to a solution whilst at the same time praising individual agency and self-determination. It is at times difficult for the reader to reconcile the idea of the deterministic basic structure with the principle of self determination.

Nevertheless, these inconsistencies are not the main focus of the book. Contrary to what is commonly argued, we find that Shelby achieves what he sets out to do in the opening pages of his book and significantly contributes to the academic literature and wider debate surrounding ghetto poverty and racial injustice in the United States. It is precisely this nuance to the criticism displayed above that confirms *Dark Ghettos* as a groundbreaking work in the philosophy of race, reparations, ethics and politics. Indeed, Shelby is often criticised for bringing no concrete solutions in the form of policy proposals to the multitude of problems he raises throughout *Dark Ghettos*. Readers are left wondering what can be done to bring about a just basic structure, and critics argue Shelby should have left more leads for future development. We still find exceptional merit in his work by arguing on the contrary that Shelby achieves exactly what he sets out to do, nothing more, nothing less. He himself concedes in the epilogue that he does not provide any solutions to the issues raised, and for good reasons. It is beyond the scope of the book to unravel fine grained policy proposals as the nature of the topic requires a deconstruction of different parts of the debate. Instead, it is excellent as an intermediary text, not as a final product to solve the issue and indeed Shelby did not intend it to be so. This instrumental perspective on *Dark Ghettos* does the book justice and salvages Shelby from the bulk of the criticism against him. Likely he hopes that his radical claims and calls for the reassessment of the status quo will necessarily fuel further developments in other domains of the social sciences and by other scholars. In any case, Shelby's book represents an insightful relaunching of debates that, in some cases, had gotten stuck. In some sense, Shelby's criticism of the medical model in *Dark Ghettos* was likely an early signal that he himself was not going to put forward any concrete solutions: if Shelby is right that policymaking and particularly its application within the realm

of ghettos is solely built on medical model foundations then surely we could benefit from a shift away from our current frame of thinking, and instead incorporate theoretical considerations over how we intend a just state to manifest itself. The lack of policy proposals is therefore probably a good thing as it gives Shelby's moral message of abolitionism all the limelight and confronts the reader himself with the individual responsibility of ensuring that tomorrow's society is fairer.

5. Conclusion

Dark Ghettos addresses not only a gap in the literature, but more importantly a gap in the moral and ethical discussions surrounding racial injustice and ghetto poverty that dominate policy making and public life. Shelby's contribution to the academic literature and the current wider debate is therefore highly significant. Shelby takes a step back from solutions he deems flawed and returns to the roots of the issues raised, laying the moral and ethical groundwork for a just basic structure. Every chapter raises critical questions about current policies and evaluates alternative moral and ethical perspectives. In this respect Shelby's work holds immense value in itself. To be frustrated with the lack of solutions offered in *Dark Ghettos* is to have missed the fundamental essence and purpose of this book and the call for intellectual and moral reflection. Shelby most likely hopes his book will trigger a revival of discussions and lead onto future research which could eventually bring his ideas to fruition.

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