The Burdens of Integration

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1. Introduction, Summary, Concerns

As a visionary black feminist pragmatist philosopher invested in social justice projects around issues of politics and place, I approached Elizabeth Anderson 's the *Imperative of Integration* with hopes that her project would be useful in my own. Her use of available social science research and Deweyan non-ideal theory have resonance with my attempts to wed philosophy with the world. I walked away from the book uncertain of who Anderson's audience was and if I was the sort of person whom she sought to persuade. Possibly Anderson's goal was to put integration back on the agenda for whites who had lost their resolve about racial inclusiveness due to concerns about black deviance. Being non-white and having a differing perspective on so-called black subcultures, I found myself both critical of and confused by many of the value judgments made throughout the analysis.

Due to the task assigned me in these comments, I will not have the time to engage Anderson's multilayered text on every claim I might need clarification of or wish to criticize, but will instead make some observations and endeavor a few critical remarks in broad sweeps, with the hope that these few interactions with the text will be a helpful contribution to this discussion about it and for the clarity that may come after Anderson's replies.

Anderson advances two primary claims. The first is a claim in non-ideal political theory, that "integration is an indispensable goal in a society characterized by categorical inequality (Anderson 2010, 180)." The second is a methodological claim about how to go about that non-ideal theory, that "social and political philosophy needs to be grounded in an empirically adequate understanding of the problems we face and the effects of proposed solutions to these problems (Anderson 2010, 180)." I support a version of both these assertions but overall I am critical of the details of the project. Both the claim of integration made and the way Anderson uses the method she proposes do not seem to reflect a sustained treatment of white hegemony in the United States as the basis for racial injustice and any deep critique of capitalism and its attending ills. Lacking these critical frames, Anderson's attempt to analyze the data does not take seriously enough the burdens of integration on black people and that the democratic ideal that she posits may not only be unrealistic (a claim she addresses a bit in the last chapter) but also undesirable. In this limited space, I'll treat the methodological concerns first and the claim of integration second.

2. The Economic Theory of Culture and Lived Experience

Anderson's method weds Deweyan non-ideal theory with the increasing call for practical philosophers to attend the data gathered by our colleagues in the social sciences. Whether or not Anderson's method can be faithfully reconciled to Dewey's own method is not a question of primary importance to me, other commentators might take it up, rather my deepest concern is rooted in another of classical Deweyan pragmatism's central claims that our work should attend to and get not only data from, but also be interpreted through, lived

experience. We live in a nation shaped by practices of white hegemony that are tricky because they have caused many of us to view the culture and norms of an idealized white mainstream that has asserted itself as universal and morally good. Its norms are taken to be the only (good) way for contemporary people to live together. Even as Anderson writes about racial stigma and social closure, the larger critique of the systemic and structural reinforcement of prejudice in the mainstream society is wanting.

Methodologically, the studies used to support Anderson's thesis may not be in themselves problematic. Throughout the text it is the value judgments Anderson makes when interpreting the data that suggest her methodology, while laudable, is hindered by an inattention to lived experience that makes her interpretations perplexing at best. It is not that I disagree with the validity of the findings of the studies Anderson uses to support her work. Yes, more black people are poor and live in crime ridden neighborhoods than should. Yes, black people who live in and attend schools in predominately white spaces seem to enjoy a level of what Anderson calls "mainstream success" that their peers in segregated spaces do not. Yet, we need only look at a few of the moves of interpretation that Anderson makes to see that other interpretations of the data are possible (and perhaps preferable) when we consider the twin realities of white hegemony and capitalism and what those findings may mean to the black people they are concern. The roots of the problem I have with Anderson's view are most likely found in the way she deploys the "economic theory of culture" she advocates.

Anderson brings in her economic theory of culture to address how responsibility for deviant black behavior should be assigned. Instead of viewing deviance as an essential part of black culture, by using an "economic framework" wherein "culture is the equilibrium outcome of individuals' strategic outcomes to each other's conduct within the constraints of their resources and opportunities (Anderson 2009, 76)," responsibility for the social conditions that produce that deviance may extend beyond the deviants, while they remain responsible for their own behaviors. On the one hand, this economic framework gives reasons why whites should not stigmatize all blacks based on the behaviors of some. On the other hand, Anderson's use of this economic view of culture as opposed to what she calls the folk anthropological version of culture, raises some concerns.

Do people actually experience culture transactionally the way that Anderson proposes? When asserting things about their 'cultures' what sorts of values and experiences are people trying to defend? How does the economic framework take into account people's lived experience of culture? Does Anderson adequately attend to black experiences and claims of culture(s) that could complicate her analysis?

Defending both her view of the economic theory of culture and her model of integration against claims that it is merely assimilationist, Anderson uses a study done by Elijah Anderson as a primary source for her claims about the nature of black experiences in the inner city without attention to other studies done of black United States life that may have given her a fuller account. Anderson's interpretation is fraught with value judgments that trivialize and pathologize many black experiences, such as possible reasons for school disengagement and the aesthetic choices black people make in a white hegemonic social world. These judgments give me pause as to whether I can follow her line of reasoning to the integration she proposes.

Is a culture of deviance from the norm all that Anderson supposes advocates of identity politics to be asserting when they speak of black culture(s)? I would hate to assume so, but the book does little to show what other characteristics these advocates might be talking about and why their view may have traction. Moreover, in attempting to disclaim a black culture, Anderson problematically asserts, "For the most part, American blacks and whites share a common American culture (Anderson 2010, 114)" but does little to explicitly tell the reader what that common culture might entail. The book does not treat the specificity of white hegemony in depth, nor does it unpack why anti-black prejudice may have particular reasons and effects that differ from the prejudices that face the well-integrated Jewish or Asian person (to use two other racial-ethnic identities Anderson mentions). Indeed, it is the recalcitrance of anti-black prejudice in what I might agree to call United States mainstream shared culture that I would have liked Anderson to consider in greater detail in her argument for integration. Claiming that residential segregation is at the root of continued anti-black prejudice does not contend with the history and effects of white supremacy as an integral, formative principle of the United States polity.

Consider the possibility of alternate interpretations based on different understandings of lived experience and value judgments that I mention above. When referring to the differences between the imperative of integration she advocates and types of assimilation that may be necessary steps toward that imperative in seeming opposition to blanket assimilative programs, Anderson lists several practices that are often coded as culturally black that black persons should or may lose in the integration process (see Anderson 114-115). In each of the three cases of acceptable integration losses, Anderson aggregates practices and habits that have differing significance from my lived experience as a black woman living the United States from a poor, working class background and her recommendations, that may have economic value (keeping a job to sustain myself), also suggest burdens of integration (tokenism, exceptionalism, violence, isolation, disrespect).   That the bulk of those burdens would fall on the integrating black person seems a multiplication of oppressions.

Anderson weds gang membership and school disengagement and claims that they are both indicative of social dysfunction (of the people who become deviant) and not of culture. We could agree that neither gangs nor school disengagement are an essential part of black culture. Yet, Anderson does not consider a claim made by mutliculturists and scholars of education that one of the reason many minorities may disengage from school is not simply because excelling in school is "acting white" but rather that what is being taught in schools has little to no import in how they should negotiate their daily lives nor does it matchup to the history and legacy of the ethnic and racial groups to which they identify. Nor does Anderson give much attention to the efforts to create education curriculum and spaces that would decenter white privilege and engage the minds of students of all races differently (cf. Walsh 1996).We could, and scholars have, interpreted school disengagement differently.

People who look like and struggle like poor, black students are often given short shift in mainstream education. Children may be rejecting education not only because their friends call it 'acting white' or because their schools lack financial resources but because the content of the curriculum leaves intact a prejudicial view of their lived experiences and privileges white hegemony. I am certain that is not enough to say that in a truly integrated society the problems of bad textbooks and misinformed teachers wouldn't exist nor am I willing

to say that for the economic gain that a good, mainstream education is supposed to lead to, that this concern is a trivial point.

Daily as a black academic at a predominately white institution who works on diversity matters in my research but also at the levels of curriculum development and campus climate, I become more and more certain that there is a normative culture of higher education that effaces, erases, and extends the oppression of non-majority students, faculty, and staff. This norm operates in opaque and limiting ways, not the least of which consists in telling those same stigmatized, oppressed people who make it to the hallowed halls for their educations or to make their livings that life is so much better when you disregard disrespect, forgive whites for their awkward expressions of prejudice, and dare not to question the nature of the disciplines and institutions who've welcomed you - even when it is soul-crushing.

Much like the value laden interpretation of school disengagement Anderson gives makes me wonder if I could support her integrative project, when she lists concerns about things such as "styles of personal appearance" in corporate practices as secondary concerns, I find myself uneasy with costs of Anderson's call to integration to black people (Anderson, 115). When she quickly dismisses claims about personal appearance in public spaces, Anderson misreads much of why blacks have contested dress codes in their workplaces. She lumps together the sagging of pants with dreadlocks as forms of personal styling like white subculture forms (tattooing, etc), that corporations might sanction against and offers that blacks may need to assimilate to mainstream styles of dress to succeed.

Surely, there are many ways and fads of dress and hairstyle among Black Americans. Yet, not understanding the significance of the commitment of many black people to wear natural, culturally or religiously significant hairstyles in a public space that has, through the continued creation and acceptance of a white centered standard, encouraged black people to use strenuous processes, at great costs, often with harsh chemicals on their hair to fit the norm - places a burden too high on the heads of black people in my opinion. To hastily write that such an issue should be a secondary concern for blacks seeking more opportunities for employment, is either cruelly insensitive or unreflectively naïve.

3. Integration, Democratic Ideals, and Agonism

I wonder if I'm wrong in concluding that Anderson's position that full, social integration of blacks into white communities (and not it would appear, the other way around) is necessary for democracy? I worry about the call for informal integration as necessary to achieve her ideal democratic situation. Not because integrated communities and institutions are (always) bad spaces, rather because her recommendations for integration place too high a burden on people already burdened by oppression. Further, I am not sure her ideal of the identity of a democratic citizen over and above other social and political identities is either attainable or desirable.

Anderson argues for a group identity of democratic citizens for all U.S. people that would be "superordinate" to their racial or ethnic identities and believes that informal, social integration is necessary to achieve this aim. Again, careful to point out that her view proposes that both disadvantaged and majority groups would be (and ought be) changed by integration, Anderson does not offer many details about how the white majority would change by having more informal interaction with black people. She admits that anti-black prejudice remains in spite of some areas of increased integration. As a black person who lives and works in spaces where I am one of few black people, I remain unconvinced that proximity breeds empathy in a forceful, politically relevant way. Affections for the one black family on the block or the black bestfriend, need not extend to other black persons. Indeed, in my lived experience (which I am sure may be echoed by a survey of my students and fellow faculty of color at my institution) there are ways in which the amiable closeness of a few persons of color is used to prove lack of prejudice, further exclude others, and maintain a status quo that refuses to interrogate or change its norms. Knowing who the accepted and acceptable blacks are allows neighbors, co-workers, and students to more easily assuage their racial fears and political and control potential wayward blacks who happen to arrive in the neighborhood or campus.

A strong argument about why or how the informal social integration Anderson champions would lead to equitable social relations better than more just public policies and interventions to counteract the ills of the legacies of racism and the nature of capitalism to subordinate people for profit was necessary. I am unsure why those of us interested in social justice should not fight for the redistribution of material resources to poor communities and make issues of civil respect, political issues (cf. Honneth 1996).

In a nation that continues to oppress (through law and custom) the great majority of black people while privileging a few of us to live more integrated lives with greater economic mobility (as long as we accept race-motivated micro aggressions as part of the deal), more needed to be said about how or why countervailing voices of collective black political commitments (in coalition with sympathetic white persons) should not be the expected and desired norm of political interactions today. In her rejection of black identity politics as a necessary part of the democratic ideal, Anderson gives too short a consideration to exactly the politicized black identities of the people actors as one of the factors at work in the Civil Rights movement to which she attaches her imperative of integration and those politicized identities that galvanized black nationalist movements whose focus on positive (constructed, as they may have been) identities and spaces for black people that she rejects without a complete hearing.

The inclusion and identity theories posited by Beverly Tatum and Iris Marion Young are too quickly dismissed at the end of the book (see pages 184 -186). Both theories, while not wholly sufficient, provide a bounty of insights into how we might forge lasting, meaningful, just social relations given our particular social milieu. Claiming that the self segregation of blacks prevents whites from interactions they need to interrogate and reject their own racial biases because such "practical learning can take place only in integrated settings, (Anderson 186)" does not address in a sustained way the practical recommendations made by Tatum or Young that would, I think offer ways for people to interact on many inclusive levels that would not overburden oppressed people with the task of educating the majority.

Anderson's democratic ideal does not seem to take seriously the lived experience of factionalism, conflict, and disagreement that might also be found at the root of a healthy, contemporary, large scale democracy (perhaps, Dewey's ideal does not either). Agonism in politics is essential to politics (cf. Mouffe 2000). Figuring out how to mediate the dangers of disagreement, factions, and dissent is a matter of politics. As citizens of United States of America, we could agree that there are some basic and fundamental rights and practices

(equality, shared responsibility for public works, centrality of the Constitution, etc.) as essential to our polity and fight it out as to what they might mean without having to become patriots in the robust sense that Anderson seems to advocate in the closing pages of the book. I find Anderson's call to a superordinate national democratic identity undesirable, not because people would be unwilling, but because it might too easily be used to silence the calls for justice that a different democratic ideal would welcome.

References:

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