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SPATIAL SEGREGATION AND INEQUALITY

Review of: Elizabeth Anderson (2010) *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 245pp.

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What happens at a university when it is the first multiracial setting its students function in? Elizabeth Anderson observed, while teaching at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in the late 80s, that subtle patterns of racial discomfort existed. For instance, during classroom discussions white students tended to ignore what black students were saying. While noticing these classroom dynamics, Anderson started to wonder whether there is a connection between the strong residential racial segregation in Michigan and these patterns of interaction at the university.

This anecdote illustrates the modus operandi Anderson uses in her book *The Imperative of Integration*<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the book she argues that political philosophy should reflect on existing social problems to identify

injustices in the world (21). It is, Anderson argues, only in this way that normative thinking works, as this makes it possible for us to move from the current world into a better one (181). With this, the research presupposes a Deweyan perspective to philosophy, which is not explicitly spelled out in the book, but emphasized by Anderson in several interviews.<sup>2</sup> Her philosophical approach entails the pragmatic starting point that experience is crucial to moral and political judging. Accordingly, Anderson argues that the critical test of any moral or political claim is to live in accordance with it and see whether the consequences are acceptable. Political philosophy should therefore focus on problems in reality that are systematic and structural. In this way, political concepts should be ‘tested in experience and revised as we fly’.<sup>3</sup>

Without a doubt, Anderson practices what she preaches. In *The Imperative* she combines an astonishing collection of research of the social sciences (sociology, psychology, economics) with political philosophy to make a convincing case that – in itself and from a democratic viewpoint – racial justice requires integration. And by using this interdisciplinary method so forcefully, Anderson shows that blending theoretical arguments with empirical analyses does make political philosophy more relevant.

In a nutshell, Anderson argues that segregation reproduces race-based injustice in multiple ways, and that, as a result, African-American people in the United States are worse off in mostly all measurable factors of living conditions. Building on Tilly’s concept of ‘durable inequalities’<sup>4</sup>, Anderson formulates a convincing relational theory of systematic group inequality that damages the functioning of democracy. However, it is not Anderson’s main ambition to show that racial injustice in the United States still exists. The crux of this book is that the primary cause of this racial injustice is *segregation*. For this reason, she elaborates extensively upon the point that spatial segregation between social groups results in massive inequalities in income, wealth, health and access to opportunities in education and employment. In addition, it strongly increases stigmatization and discrimination of racial groups.

If we try to place Anderson's argument within the American discussion on racism, it is clear where she stands. The book begins with the statement that it aims 'to resurrect the ideal of integration from the grave of the Civil Rights movement' (1). This may be a lost cause, Anderson acknowledges, as this movement lost the battle regarding the importance of factual (social) integration of racial groups long ago, partly due to left wing political movements in the late 1960s that shifted priorities from 'redistribution' to 'recognition'. Anderson nevertheless insists, although diversity should be celebrated, that theories of recognition cannot address the continuing problems of racial inequalities in the United States. Moreover, to believe this would be an 'illusion' (2). To prove this, Anderson expounds different mechanisms that demonstrate that segregation is the principle cause of disadvantaged access to resources, social networks and political influence. For this reason, the United States should return to the ambitions of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a landmark United States Supreme Court case that stated that 'separate educational facilities are inherently unequal'.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting part of Anderson's analysis is the way she uses contemporary social psychological research to ground her arguments. She refers, *inter alia*, to experiments that show that conscious and unconscious cognitive biases catalyze racial stereotypes and harden existing gaps between groups (74). Anderson combines this observation with researches that show that segregation strengthens these biases as well. In this way, she reasons that stigmatization and segregation are linked and mutually reinforce each other. As a result, this ongoing mechanism makes blacks in the United States victims of prejudice and discrimination, which deprives them of access to jobs, public goods and financial, cultural and human capital.

Another level of analysis that Anderson untangles is that these consequences of spatial segregation erode true democracy. To illustrate this, she asserts that democracy must be understood on three levels: as a membership organization, a mode of government, and a culture:

'As a membership organization, democracy involves universal and equal citizenship of all the permanent members of a society who live under a

state's jurisdiction. As a mode of government, democracy is government by the people, carried out by discussion among equals. As a culture, democracy consists in the free, cooperative interaction of citizens from all walks of life on terms of equality in civil society.' (89)

According to Anderson, these three levels of democracy need to work together, as they cannot be fully realized without each other. Within this explanation, she mainly stresses the importance of the cultural aspect of democracy. To put it somewhat brusquely: the main political philosophical argument of *The Imperative* is that laws alone cannot make a democracy work. To make it possible, uncomplicated interactions among citizens across (racial) group lines must also exist. This is crucial to maintain a civil society that an adequately functioning democracy requires: one that is based on equality, not solely in a legal sense, but in the sense of habits of association based on terms of equality and mutual respect. This means that social integration must be actively stimulated by dismantling spatial integration, to arrive at a situation in which different racial groups live, work and learn together without discomforts while regarding each other as equals. Anderson concludes that to realize this type of civil society is an imperative of justice. Given that segregation produces structural inequality and erodes democracy, integration is necessary to (re)create a just society.

In the second part of the book, Anderson deepens her analysis by demonstrating that segregation is not solely an injustice in itself, but furthermore negatively influences democracy. In chapter five, for example, the epistemic problem is discussed that a segregated society cannot make adequate democratic decisions, as representative decisions need an integrated society on all levels. Yet, when a society is racially segregated, the politicians have – most likely – no specific knowledge of the problems and experiences of groups to which they do not belong, which they do not meet and that are not actively participating in public life. As a consequence, these politicians are *epistemically* incapable of making decisions that would benefit the whole of society. Instead, they focus their political deliberations and decisions on problems they are familiar with, leaving the concerns of segregated groups out of their political reasoning. In the United States, this results in – as most politicians are white – the problems

and realities of the black people living in (the subcultures of the) ghetto's not being acknowledged in politics. As a consequence, no public policies are developed that would adequately solve their problems or fit their needs (94).

In the final chapters of the book, Anderson elaborates on the solution to all of these problems caused by segregation: integration. Therefore she explores a vision of public policy that focuses on spatial desegregation and of implementing affirmative action guidelines that make the integration of all groups possible, as only such an integrationist approach fosters a society in which different racial groups see each other and interact as equals. To make this claim plausible, Anderson discusses the 'contact hypothesis' formulated by Gordon Allport.<sup>6</sup> This hypothesis entails that frequent contact between different social groups helps people to overcome group stereotypes and evaluate out-group members as individuals (123). In other words, people need to have regular interaction to feel comfortable with each other. For this reason, institutionally supported interaction with members of stigmatized groups is necessary to reduce the patterns of discrimination against them. This may be an inconvenient truth. However, Anderson asserts the U.S. needs to bite the bullet: as a start, affirmative action is required in neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces to create the social integration needed for equality.

It could be argued that Anderson's constructive argumentation to support integration and affirmative action is fragile, as it leans so heavily on this 'contact hypothesis'. What if it is simply not true that contact and interaction between members from different social groups decreases in-group favoritism and discriminatory attitudes towards each other? Anderson refers to 'hundreds of studies that show strong support' for the contact hypothesis, mostly conducted by psychologists. For instance, adult graduates of integrated high schools report that they value interracial experiences, are more comfortable with interracial interaction, and are better prepared to live in a diverse society (127).

A more salient downside of *The Imperative* is that Anderson seems to assume that white people are the only actors in the problems that surround racial segregation and inequalities. She implies therefore that blacks are

merely recipients of social changes. In my opinion, it would have been interesting if more data was used on the efforts that are already being conducted and needed by African-Americans in the United States to change their present-day situation. The book exclusively portrays blacks as victims, not as active participants in public life with corresponding rights, responsibilities and duties. Yet, after reading all the political difficulties caused by social segregation summed up in *The Imperative*, I am inclined to think that a combined effort of both whites and blacks is crucial to change the current social ethos in the United States.

In addition, I suppose that for scholars of ethnicity, many concepts and mechanisms that Anderson illuminates are not new. However, with her specific framing of an empirical situation within political philosophy, Anderson shows that normative theory can give interesting new interpretations of factual problems. Subsequently, these interpretations can be used to support arguments in favour of integration policies such as affirmative action. The chosen approach by Anderson makes it possible to describe specific forms of experience (domination and oppression) in an original way that creates a broader vocabulary with which to analyze these difficulties.

Accordingly, I believe that the basic structure of the philosophical argument in favour of affirmative action could also contribute to European discussions on ethnicity. There is no doubt that most parts of the reasoning expounded in *The Imperative* could analogously be applied to strongly segregated cities such as Amsterdam and Paris. And if we take what Anderson says seriously, most of the European tensions surrounding multiculturalism could be solved when different social groups would start to actually live together and cooperate, instead of residing in separated neighborhoods or *banlieues*. Surely, a relevant follow-up question would be whether this is realistically and pragmatically possible; a question that is not satisfactorily addressed in the book.

To conclude, it must be emphasized that one of the most appealing features of the book is the optimism that underlies its strategy. Anderson seems to implicate that if we understand the structures that are holding the existing stigmatization and racism in place, we are able to overcome

these phenomena – and that we should. I have the impression that Anderson tried to write a classic example of a philosophical project she thinks is important<sup>7</sup>. By using a pragmatic perspective, she wants scholars to focus on direct practical effects to realize a fairer, more equal, more democratic and more just society.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, Princeton University Press 2010. Hereafter referred to as *The Imperative*.

<sup>2</sup> For instance: <http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/1251/>

<sup>3</sup> David Hildebrand (2008) *Dewey*. Oneworld publications, 96.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Tilly (1999) *Durable Inequality*, University of California Press.

<sup>5</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) 347 U.S. 483.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Allport (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Anderson (1999) 'What is the point of Equality?', in *Ethics*, 109 (2): 287-337.