Presentation to symposium on Elizabeth Anderson’s *Imperative of Integration*, UMassBoston, April, 2016

I am happy and honored to be commenting on EA’s *Imperative of Integration* (II), in my view one of the best and most important philosophy books on race written in the past 30 years or so, and exemplary of how social and political philosophy should be conducted, with a deep use of social science interwoven with a normative philosophical framework.

Drawing on the work of social theorist Charles Tilly, EA sees black-white inequality as one instance of categorical inequality—inequalities of socio-economic condition and social power between different salient social identity groups such as race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. Anderson emphasizes that dominant social-identity-defined groups sustain and reinforce their dominance by various mechanisms. One mechanism she focuses on frequently is “social closure” by which the dominant group deliberately prevents subordinate groups from accessing the goods that the dominant group possesses or has control over. Segregation, for EA, is a primary form of social closure. This social closure perspective informs the centrality that EA gives to segregation as a mechanism for sustaining racial inequality between whites and blacks. [other groups]

But there is an ambiguity in how Anderson wants us to understand the *normative* status of categorical inequality that I think reverberates through the book’s subsequent discussion of racial segregation. Clearly the dominant groups’ social closure or opportunity hoarding is a form of injustice; it unfairly prevents subordinate groups from accessing social goods that the dominant group has in abundance. But what about the *original* establishment of the dominant group’s dominance over the subordinate group, prior to their opportunity hoarding? However that came about—through conquest, colonization, historical advantage, or whatever—is that not also an injustice, one that has to be accounted for by a different normative principle than opportunity hoarding or social closure? To put it another way, doesn’t opportunity hoarding and social closure more generally exacerbate an existing injustice, and constitute injustice partly in their own right and partly through that exacerbation? In my reading, Anderson focuses on the injustices of the mechanisms by which dominant groups sustain their unjust advantage over subordinate groups, but not the injustice of whatever produced the original dominance itself.

This ambiguity about the two forms of injustice involved in social dominance seems to me to carry over to the much more extended discussion of racial inequality in the book. EA argues that segregation is a central mechanism of racial injustice and inequality in the present, and is itself unjust because it produces, exemplifies, and is produced by racial inequality. But for the most part this causal link between segregation and inequality only operates against a background of already-existing historical racial inequality. Many of the segregative processes EA discusses would only produce or sustain inequality against this background. For example if *residential* racial segregation was brought about by racial ethnocentrism rather than racial animus but, in contrast to the world we live in now, the races were comparable in economic standing, political power, occupational location, and so on, that process and its resultant separation of racial groups would not produce or constitute injustice.

To put it another way, current segregation sustains racial inequality only against a background of white dominance, or as Charles Mills refers to it, white supremacy. White supremacy, in Mills’s account, is a continuing legacy in the present of past colonialism, slavery, and systemic discrimination, though discrimination also continues into the present. But white supremacy or dominance is a structure that is not itself accounted for by current segregation. In this way of looking at it, segregation is a secondary, not primary, cause of inequality; white dominance is a, or the, primary cause. And this shift in causal primacy has implications for what the book’s title expresses as the “imperative of integration.” For the imperative is to get rid of white dominance and unjust white advantage. There is no actual imperative of integration per se. Rather, integration is only one of many interventions that may help to bring about racial justice. The only imperative is to end racial injustice.

As Tommie Shelby has pointed out in his critique of II, the book does not take an entirely consistent view of the precise causal role of segregation in producing racial inequality. Sometimes it says segregation is an “important” cause, other times that it is the “linchpin” of inequality, implying at least that it is the *central* cause. I think the overall impression of the book is that the causal role must be strong, greater than “one among many” and even greater than “a necessary causal factor” since this is consistent with there being quite a few such necessary causal features. It is that claim for segregation’s both explanatory and normative primacy that I am questioning.

A related worry is this: Anderson generally defines “segregation” as having two distinct forms or modes. One is *spatial* separation—assigning groups to different geographical spaces or institutions, such as neighborhoods or colleges. The second is *role* segregation, that assigns groups to different roles that are hierarchically ordered, some having more power and greater rewards than others. *Role* segregation has inequality and injustice already built into it, while *spatial* segregation does not. The roles are not only different but defined as *unequal*, while spatial separation does not, *purely in itself*, involve any inequality. So if blacks are assigned to subordinate roles in workplaces, this will involve other inequalities attaching to that one, such as unequal salaries, power, and authority. It seems circular to define a mode of segregation as involving inequality and then go on to claim that it *generates* inequality. We still need to know why blacks were assigned to these unequal roles in the first place. Just citing “segregation” will not provide an explanation. In line with my suggestion from a moment ago, white dominance may explain that inequality, and thus will be a more primary explanans than segregation itself.

Perhaps Anderson would reply that *past* racial segregation has contributed very substantially to *current* white dominance; we still live with the legacy of state-sponsored segregation, for example. But the unjust effects of *past* segregative processes are not always best undone by *present* integrative ones. For example segregation has contributed to a huge asset or wealth gap between blacks and whites, about 13-1 (as of 2011, the last year for which I could find figures); but this does not tell us now how to rectify that wealth gap. For example a program to encourage and make it easier for blacks to own homes, and an equity supplement in the value of homes might be more effective ways to close up that wealth gap than trying to move blacks to white neighborhoods. (not that one necessarily has to choose between them).

Maybe white dominance is the linchpin of inequality, and segregation, especially understood in its mode as not already incorporating inequality, is simply one of many mechanisms it makes use of. As such, integration then plays less of a role in fostering equality than II often claims,. Integration won’t always bring about equality, and many other things will or would bring it about. Indeed I think II can be read in a way that treats both *discrimination* and *anti-black stigma* as two partially independent (both from each other and from segregation) mechanisms that generate unjust inequality and other harms, such as public racial demeaning—and the correcting or preventing of which fosters equality.

For example chapter 3 lays out a very rich conception of discrimination, involving various forms (e.g. evaluative, statistical, prejudicial), including “2nd order discrimination” in which an agent discriminates against a characteristic associated with a stigmatized group even when that characteristic is manifested by a different group—discriminating against white kids wearing low-slung pants is an example. Anderson is making two very important points in this discussion of discrimination. One is that discrimination covers a good deal more ground than is generally recognized. It accounts for more unequal outcomes than a simpler and narrower account of it might suggest. The second is that, despite this, discrimination is far from being able to fully account for all unjust inequality, that there are many other injustice-producing mechanisms other than discrimination.[[1]](#footnote-1) Still discrimination *is* a significant source of inequality and yet it is not the same as segregation. As II points out, segregation can feed discrimination, for example by contributing to cognitive distortions about the character of groups that the agent seldom encounters, that help produce discriminatory behaviors. And discrimination for example in housing is an important, though by no means the only, contributor to residential segregation. But discrimination still remains a distinct inequality-generating process, something different from segregation and not directly dealt with by integration, though perhaps integration could be helpful in certain ways. A robust legal regime of anti-discrimination enforcement to prevent and punish discrimination (which does not currently exist in the US) is a different matter than bringing about integration per se.

Something similar can be said about a 3rd inequality-generating factor—anti-black stigma, or a public negative valuing—that is distinct from both discrimination and segregation, although it arguably intensifies each of them and is also fed by them. The book’s discussion of stigma is very powerful, and I won’t go into further detail on it but am making the larger point that the book can be read in a way that does *not* privilege segregation over these other two inequality generating mechanisms but sees tackling each of them as central to dealing with inequality. Perhaps this view is actually compatible with the claim that segregation is a linchpin of inequality, but only if there can be more than one linchpin, a view not implied by the overall framing of the argument of II.

Interestingly, Anderson sometimes treats integration in a much more tentative way than the title implies. In chapter 6 she says that while there are theoretical reasons for thinking that integration will bring about equality, the proof is in the pudding, and one has to try out integrative strategies and see if they really have this inequality-reducing effect. Anderson implies that they may well not, and that we have to look at the empirical evidence, in light of the Deweyan “experimental” framework that she advocates. But by this logic, one could say the same with many or at least several other plausible equality-producing initiatives—such as the robust legal anti-discrimination regime just mentioned, or social movements aimed at reducing inequality of various sorts—such as the Black Lives Matter movement or even the movement that has propelled Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign, which, even though not directed centrally at *racial* inequality, if successful would in fact bring about significant reduction in various forms of inequality between blacks and whites. On this view it is unclear why integration should be accorded the primacy the book officially accords it, in bringing about racial equality and justice.

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Finally although Anderson’s focus in the book is on the United States and her argument for the importance of integration as an inequality-reducing initiative makes use of many arguments specific to the US context, I wonder if a brief look at some other countries might give us pause about the centrality of integration to the production of racial equality. Anderson does occasionally mention other countries and I think at an earlier stage she had aspired to make the argument for integration more general and spanning more countries.

I am thinking of two countries on which I have done a lot of work, Brazil and South Africa. Both share with the United States the feature of having large black populations, where those populations are distinctly disadvantaged, and people of European ancestry, that is, white people, are a distinctly privileged and advantaged population. That is to say, all 3 countries can be characterized by unjust white advantage and white dominance, although in SA the government is run largely by blacks.

Yet both South Africa and Brazil are importantly different from the US with respect to the issue of integration and its relation to inequality. To start with Brazil, with respect to race, Brazil is a much more residentially and socially integrated society than the US. It has no history of de jure segregation, nor of de facto segregation. Black people and white people do not live in separate neighborhoods. (I recognize that the terms “black” and “white” are not used in the same way in Brazil as in the US and that there are a much higher percentage of what we would call mixed persons in Brazil than in the US, often called “brown” in Brazil. Nevertheless, I follow the proposed usage of the Afro-Brazilian movement in using white to mean of predominant European ancestry and black to mean of visible African ancestry.) Blacks and whites marry one another at a much higher rate than in the US, though lower than either intermarries with “browns.” The racial groups socialize with much greater frequency and ease than do blacks and whites in the US. And yet the society is at least as and probably more racially stratified than the US is; by every socio-economic measure, whites are much better off than blacks. There is still a quite strong stigma attached to blackness, arguably more intense than in the US, although also taking a different form; as Anderson points out, in the US black stigma prompts avoidance, especially in residential choices, while in Brazil the negative public value placed on blackness does not manifest itself in residential choices. Altogether, a system of white advantage is held in place but not by segregative processes (except the purely inequality-enforcing forms of them).

South Africa poses a completely different challenge that entirely concerns demography. Although even in the post-apartheid period, whites still way disproportionately possess all forms of capital that Anderson mentions in II—financial, personal, social, and cultural—compared to blacks, the idea of integrating the 80% black population with the 8% white population as a way to share that capital equitably among the two racial groups is obviously not a feasible proposition. There are, to be sure, some minor initiatives driven by a “share the capital” approach—for example requiring corporations to have blacks on their boards. And there are strong affirmative action programs in university admissions, driven in part by a share-the-capital outlook.

What I wonder about the South Africa case is whether the issue of acquiring the qualifications necessary to assume responsible positions in the work force at various levels comes apart from the issue of the sort of “bridging capital”—that is, skills and contacts derived from relationships between more and less advantaged groups—that Anderson emphasizes. Would she want to say that in South African society, educational structures must be put in place that will directly impart to blacks the skills and capabilities of workplace functioning, *without* doing so by way of a capital sharing? Or would the sharing still have to take place, but may have to do so from the small number of advantaged blacks to the much larger number of disadvantaged blacks?

In either case, the South African situation seems to suggest that integration cannot be a central desideratum in the creation of racial equality in South Africa. Does this have any implications for the US? In his critique of Anderson’s book, Tommie Shelby proposes what is essentially an answer to this question by saying that a combination of resource equality plus anti-discrimination enforcement may be much more important to creating racial justice in the US than is integration. That is, on his view, the South African model may be more pertinent to the US than II implies.

1. This argument is in part meant to counter the view that the disadvantages suffered by blacks are a product of their own making, through self-undermining cultural norms. Anderson provides an exhaustive and convincing refutation of this view, and the inequality generating mechanisms I am discussing here are meant in part to be an alternative explanation to this “cultural” one. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)