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Racial Integration, Cost-Benefit Analysis, and Philosophical Humility[†]

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Abstract

D. C. Matthew offers an original and important critique of racial integration. His claim that integration will aggravate phenotypic devaluation of blackness, threatening black self-worth, is persuasive. However, his stronger normative argument that blacks should reject integration as a consequence because the potential harms to black self-worth outweigh its purported benefits is less convincing, as it rests on a dubious cost-benefit analysis. Ultimately, I argue that we should resist the impulse to offer a definitive cost-benefit analysis of racial integration in any case, given the uncertainty of such a complex process unfolding in a speculative future.

Résumé

D. C. Matthew propose une critique originale et importante de l'intégration raciale. Son affirmation selon laquelle l'intégration aggravera la dévaluation phénotypique des traits typiquement noirs, menaçant l'estime de soi noire, est persuasive. Pourtant, son argument normatif le plus solide, selon lequel les Noirs devraient rejeter l'intégration puisque les dommages potentiels à leur estime de soi l'emportent sur ses prétendus avantages, est moins convaincant, car il s'appuie sur une analyse coût-bénéfice douteuse. En définitive, étant donné l'incertitude d'un processus aussi complexe qui se déroule dans un avenir spéculatif, je soutiens que nous devrions, dans tous les cas, résister à la tentation d'offrir une analyse coût-bénéfice définitive de l'intégration raciale.

Keywords: integration; race; blackness; self-worth

What is racial integration? Is it an essential component of racial justice? Ought we to pursue it at all? These questions have occupied advocates and activists for racial justice at least since the era of Reconstruction in the United States, and took centre stage at the height of the modern civil rights movement. Popular accounts of the all-too-often overdrawn opposition between Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Power movement typically allege irreconcilable positions on two fundamental issues:

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the use of political violence, and the desirability of integration. Consequently, it can be a challenge to offer a novel perspective on the question of integration, and contemporary debates on the subject all too often feel like retreads of well-worn conversations. It is a great virtue of D. C. Matthew's work that he offers a genuinely novel evaluation (and critique) of racial integration, specifically for blacks, on the basis of phenotypic devaluation and its threat to black self-worth.

Matthew makes a convincing case that integration, defined broadly as "the joining together of the members of distinct groups into some form of enduring association despite their differing group membership," will likely aggravate phenotypic devaluation of blackness, depressing the relational value of blacks (III). This in turn will likely produce four negative effects on self-worth: diminished self-esteem, diminished self-respect, feelings of inferiority, and acceptance of inferiority. Advocates of integration should absolutely reckon with this challenge. But Matthew goes further than this, at least initially, arguing that the threat to black self-worth posed by integration trumps any benefits that integration might bring, thus establishing a moral and political obligation on the part of blacks to reject integration: "Integration, I will argue, threatens black self-worth, and for blacks a concern to safeguard their self-worth should outweigh the justice and other benefits that integration is supposed to bring" (Introduction). I focus my own response on this strong version of Matthew's thesis. My first claim is simply that Matthew does not sufficiently undertake the implied cost-benefit analysis that would establish a definitive case against integration. But my deeper claim is that philosophical humility compels us to be modest about our capacity to offer any such objective analysis to begin with, despite the political uncertainty that such modesty yields.

While Matthew offers his critique of integration as a rebuttal to a group of "new integrationists," his principal antagonist throughout the article is Elizabeth Anderson. Anderson's *The Imperative of Integration* (2010) argues that racial integration (of black and white Americans) is an imperative of justice, and that the United States has simply abandoned its pursuit. Anderson reasons quite simply that black-white segregation is the linchpin of black inequality in the United States, and therefore integration is necessary to overcome this inequality and achieve justice for blacks as well as genuine multiracial democracy. The harms caused by segregation that she establishes via careful empirical analysis are numerous and grave: severely constrained access to goods and opportunities, including employment, retail and commercial services, health-related goods and professional services, and public services such as trash removal and recreational facilities, lack of financial, social, human, and cultural capital, increased exposure to crime, decay, environmental degradation, and abusive policing, reinforced subjection to stigmatization and discrimination, and the undermining of democracy (Anderson, 2010, Chapters 2, 3, and 5). Matthew does not take issue with this list of harms, or even with Anderson's proposal that integration can resolve or at least ameliorate most of them: "These arguments, it should be noted, do *not* question the benefits of integration for which integrationists like Anderson (2010) have argued" (IV.4). Instead, he proposes that, *contra* the attempts of new integrationists to distinguish integration from assimilation, integration is likely to have assimilatory effects in practice, and these effects in turn will aggravate the negative impact of phenotypic devaluation on black self-worth (III, IV). Effectively, then,

Matthew has established a cost-benefit analysis. Do the self-worth harms of integration outweigh its purported benefits? It is noteworthy that Matthew himself offers an equivocal answer to this question: "Rather, I hold that self-worth is so valuable, and consequently the potential self-worth harms of integration so significant, that they *may* outweigh the justice/democracy benefits it is said to bring" (IV.4, emphasis added).

Such an equivocal answer is insufficient to establish the strong normative claim against integration that Matthew initially makes. To begin with, he is exceedingly careful and meticulous in his effort to rebut any argument that phenotypic devaluation itself may wane under conditions of integration due to the prejudice reduction that accompanies increased intergroup contact (V.1). And if phenotypic devaluation persists even after other forms of prejudice and stigma decrease, then the negative effects on black self-worth of integration will also persist. He identifies residential integration, in particular, as the crucial engine of this process, "because it increases the risk of psychological integration" (III). Psychological integration in turn produces "the dissolution of the group boundaries that I have argued are so important to black self-esteem" (III). But insofar as he seeks to convince his readers that the benefits of integration do not compensate for its costs, he owes them an equally meticulous examination of its purported benefits — as well as the implied costs of not integrating. Instead, this side of the ledger receives far less attention. Matthew's argument against the costs of continued segregation possibly outweighing the costs of integration amounts to a simple assertion of optimism: "I believe that we should not underestimate what a committed and determined black population can achieve despite the significant obstacles that it faces" (V.2). Could we not make a similarly sanguine claim about what a committed and determined black population could achieve to maintain its positive group identity during and after integration?

In fact, Matthew considers such a claim, but promptly dismisses it as inapplicable to the black community as a whole. He grants that "certain individual blacks" may be able to maintain "a sufficiently robust sense of racial identity" that could block or diminish the negative self-worth effects of residential integration (VI.1). He views "parental practices of racial socialization" (VI.1) as particularly crucial here. In other words, black parents in integrated communities could raise their children with a strong sense of identity and self-worth to protect them from the corrosive impact of psychological integration. But he sees such cases as exceptional and insufficient to combat the general tendencies of integration: "Some black parents may not have the requisite knowledge and skills to appropriately socialize their children; these must be learned, but we should not presume that all blacks have done so" (VI.1). On this account, black families are seen as isolated from each other and Matthew does not contemplate deliberate efforts to maintain and strengthen black solidarity and networks of communal support. Instead, parents either do or do not already have the tools they need to protect themselves and their children from internalizing phenotypic devaluation; this is treated as a brute fact about the world and not a malleable condition. It is difficult to reconcile such profound pessimism about the possibility of an organized political response to black devaluation under integration with an equally profound optimism about black possibility under segregation. Matthew simply does not subject his own optimism about black possibility under

segregation to the same meticulous scrutiny as the possibility of overcoming the negative self-worth impacts of integration, thus effectively presupposing the ledger that he needs to maintain his overall argument.

Notably, Matthew offers his paean to black commitment and determination as a rejoinder not only to those who point to the material inequalities associated with segregation, but also to those who recognize that segregation “itself imposes its own self-worth harms” due to the “stigmatizing effects of a segregated racial inequality” (V.2). That is to say, the ledger does not simply present negative self-worth effects on one side (integration) and negative material effects on the other (segregation). As Clarissa Rile Hayward has argued, racial segregation as manifested in the very different spatial conditions and appearances of differently racialized neighbourhoods reproduces a host of racial stereotypes at a practical and unconscious level: “When identities are (to borrow a word from Bourdieu’s lexicon) ‘objectified’ — when they are translated, that is, from discursive forms, such as identity-narratives, into objects, or into things — then competent social actors master them *practically*” (Hayward, 2013, pp. 46–47). Both blacks and whites, and other members of a multiracial society, learn these practical lessons not only from directly witnessing the disparity between predominantly black neighbourhoods with high degrees of concentrated poverty and predominantly white, prosperous neighbourhoods, but also from relentless depictions of these disparities in popular media. As such, segregation carries the risk that blacks themselves may internalize the idea that the impoverished conditions in so-called ghettos stem from either intrinsic or culturally embedded deficiencies in black people.

The problem cuts deeper than this, though. For Matthew’s rhetoric about a committed and determined black population inadvertently reinforces this very idea of black cultural deficiency, echoing longstanding conservative ‘culture of poverty’ arguments that pay insufficient attention to the structural form of racism. The latter problem manifests in Matthew’s very definition of racism, which he understands as a personal disposition or attitude. Definitional quibbles aside, however, my concern here is that the idea of a black community having the capacity effectively to will itself into a better social, political, economic, and educational position through its own internal effort, after decades of public and private disinvestment, redlining, environmental degradation, neoliberal austerity, and criminalization and hyper-incarceration, comes dangerously close to implying that the persistence of all these problems lies in a lack of sufficient black will and effort. If the black community has this capacity today, did it not have it 20 years ago? 50 years ago? And, if so, did it simply fail to exert itself sufficiently to address these problems? The injustices and inequalities that Anderson ties to segregation are deeply embedded in the physical and material conditions of metropolitan regions. It is not clear how determination and commitment alone can redress such systemic deprivation, magnified across generations.

The key point here is not that Matthew gets the cost-benefit analysis wrong. I am not claiming that the costs of resisting integration outweigh the costs of integrating. In fact, as Matthew notes, my own work on integration defends black integration pessimism and rejects any moral or political obligation on the part of blacks to pursue integration (Stanley, 2017). But this is because integration necessarily entails an uncertain process that will unfold across time, and the complexities of this process escape the human capacity for certain prediction or quantification. Furthermore,

the complexity and diversity of human psychology itself also renders it difficult to predict with certainty what kind of psychological impact such a process might have on different populations, as well as different individuals within a population. Indeed, Matthew ultimately examines how phenotypic variation among blacks may undermine aspects of his argument, concluding that blacks with a “less stereotypical” appearance would likely suffer less from phenotypic devaluation and therefore may benefit more from integration: “Lighter-skinned blacks and blacks with other less stereotypical features (e.g., narrower noses) may come to enjoy the full benefits of integration, while more stereotypical blacks are denied the same” (V.3). My claim about psychological diversity is still more capacious: phenotypically stereotypical or not, different black people will simply evaluate and rank the expected costs and benefits of integration differently. For this reason, I am wary of philosophers and political theorists who purport to measure these costs and benefits objectively, and I would urge greater modesty about what our theorizing can actually reveal.

This position does, however, produce its own political quandary. After conceding that not all blacks stand to suffer the same degree of phenotypic devaluation under integration, Matthew nonetheless argues on the grounds of solidarity that all blacks should stand together in their rejection of integration: “In particular, I suggest that solidarity demands that less stereotypical blacks decline opportunities for social inclusion that are denied to more stereotypical blacks. Included here are opportunities to integrate” (V.3). This framing of the problem implies that decisions about the pursuit of integration boil down to considerations of personal gain. But what of those blacks who pursue integration not for personal gain but as a collective political project precisely because they remain unpersuaded by Matthew’s cost-benefit analysis and see integration as a means of advancing the political, social, and economic equality of the group? Solidarity considerations are perfectly reasonable, but they cannot guarantee a unified position on integration. As such, divisions within the black community (and among the broader community of those committed to racial justice and the end of anti-blackness) will necessarily persist, possibly weakening their collective political power.

There is no perfect solution to this problem. We cannot excise uncertainty, division, and contestation about means and ends from any political project. But perhaps we — and here I include all those committed to racial justice — can heed Matthew’s call for solidarity in another way. Recognizing that, if given a choice, some blacks will choose integration and others will choose to remain in predominantly black communities, we can organize politically to enable this choice under the least coercive conditions possible. That is to say, we should strengthen fair housing laws and their enforcement, and ensure the availability of affordable housing across metropolitan regions, while also investing significant resources in neighbourhoods with high degrees of concentrated poverty. This position echoes my fellow responder Andrew Valls’ liberal defence of community black nationalism: “An alternative set of policies might offer African Americans a different array of choices: between participating in well-funded, thriving white-dominated institutions, on the one hand, and participating in well-funded, thriving black-dominated institutions on the other” (Valls, 2010, p. 474). By organizing and fighting for such conditions, blacks and their allies could express their solidarity with those blacks who resist integration and those blacks who

pursue it, forging a coalition that comprises unity and dissension at once. Of course, the political feasibility of such a project in this moment of reactionary moral panics around critical race theory and Black Lives Matter may look grim. But surely no less grim than the possibility of black communities simply transforming their own material conditions through an act of willpower. The goal of political organizing and solidarity, after all, is to turn the unimaginable into the imaginable, and the imaginable into the possible.

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