

Survey Article: Articulated Darkness: White Supremacy, Patriarchy, and Capitalism in Shelby's *Dark Ghettos**

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A ghetto can be improved in one way only: out of existence.
James Baldwin¹

TOMMIE Shelby's *Dark Ghettos* renews the call for ghetto abolitionism, and offers a radical critique of the way in which the black urban poor are governed. It makes three important contributions. First, it revives a tradition that regards the existence of ghettos as the result of systemic injustices in contemporary US society. Shelby argues that “dark ghettos” are the product of a confluence of social injustices; he aims to develop a “systematic account of social injustices along the dimensions of race, gender and class.”² For Shelby, ghetto abolitionism requires fundamental changes to the basic structure of US society, rather than narrowly targeted policy interventions into the lives of ghetto inhabitants. He calls for an end to racial discrimination in employment, housing, and lending markets, a more equitable distribution of societal wealth, broad redistributive policies (p. 47), the abolition of class stratification (pp. 36–7), full employment, meaningful work, and a freer conception of the family (pp. 77, 193).

Second, Shelby offers a radical critique of the way in which the urban poor are governed by evaluating whether coercive state anti-poverty measures are morally

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¹Quoted in Mehrsa Baradaran, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 4.

²Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 5; page numbers in parentheses throughout refer to this work.

permissible. He argues that many coercive state policies cannot be justified in a society in which the basic structure is unjust.

Finally, Shelby develops a political ethics of the oppressed. He presents a powerful case that many of the behaviors of ghetto residents that are commonly seen as either immoral or deviant are, in fact, legitimate forms of resistance against an unjust society. “Noncompliance with societal expectations,” Shelby argues, such as “refusing to delay childbearing, to marry, to accept low-paying and demeaning jobs, to respect the law, and to submit to other ‘mainstream’ norms—can be a healthy expression of self-respect and a morally rooted opposition to the status quo” (p. 276).

Shelby’s careful analysis of the moral limits of anti-poverty policies under conditions of injustice and his account of the ethics of the oppressed are important and much-needed interventions in the debate. *Dark Ghettos* forcefully re-centers the question of justice in our assessment of ghetto disadvantage and governance of the black urban poor. Maybe most importantly, Shelby’s analysis brilliantly subverts and critiques common representations of citizens in ghettoized communities as either deviant objects in need of control or passive objects in need of betterment. Instead, they appear as moral and political subjects forcefully asserting their agency and rejecting a deeply unjust society.

Dark Ghettos ends with an invitation to a broader debate about the transformations necessary to abolish the ghetto. Shelby concludes the epilogue with the hope that “other scholars, seeing merit in my approach, will be moved to supplement, build on and correct these initial efforts” (p. 284). In this spirit, we would like to offer two broad critiques of Shelby’s account. First, we argue that *Dark Ghettos* does not pay sufficient attention to the concerns and perspectives of women in marginalized black communities. Shelby implicitly centers the perspective of young black men. Unfortunately, this tends to obscure questions of gender inequality and injustice. In the following, we will discuss this with regards to Shelby’s analysis of work, the family, and “impure dissent.”

Second, while Shelby excellently describes what the state *may not do* and what ghetto inhabitants *may refuse to do* under conditions of injustice, he has less to say about what is required in order to bring about a just society. He offers a broad account of the principles that a just society would have to satisfy, as well as making very broad policy recommendations. But these recommendations appear against the background of an underspecified account of what he takes the nature of the existing system and its structural tendencies and limits to be.³ Consequently, it remains unclear whether Shelby thinks that the current economic order is capable of realizing his visions of racial and economic justice. There are moments that seem to indicate that Shelby hopes for a return to an expanded and more inclusive welfare state. Without a more concrete account of the structural tendencies of the

³Such considerations may, as Shelby argues, exceed the boundaries of philosophical inquiry. We consider them here in order to think about the political implications of Shelby’s vision of a more just society.

present social and economic order, however, it is difficult to evaluate his vision of economic and racial justice pragmatically and politically—that is, with a view towards implementation—and to understand the change that it requires.

In the following, we first review key aspects of Shelby’s argument about the limits of state anti-poverty politics and the ethics of the oppressed. We then identify and discuss aspects of Shelby’s analysis that would have benefitted from a more explicit engagement with the perspective of women in ghettoized communities. In the last section, we offer some initial thoughts on the questions that a political and pragmatic evaluation of Shelby’s vision of racial and economic justice raises. We argue that the articulation of white supremacy and capitalism tends to systematically frustrate the realization of Shelby’s vision of racial and economic justice, and that we must therefore develop an analytical framework capable of theorizing the mutual imbrication of capitalist and white supremacist logics. Such considerations, we maintain, prompt a reconceptualization of the domination that marginalized black communities experience and help us think about the structural obstacles to and political possibilities for abolishing the ghetto.

I. DARK GHETTOS

Shelby criticizes an approach to ghetto poverty that is popular with academics and pundits alike—the “medical model.” The medical model, according to Shelby, understands the problems of the ghetto as the result of deviancy from societal norms. Issues such as poverty and crime are seen as the outcome of malfunctioning social arrangements *within* the social space of the ghetto, rather than as the result of structural injustices that characterize contemporary US society as a whole. Shelby argues that this perspective produces technocratic solutions to the problems of ghetto poverty and marginalization. It sidelines the moral responsibility of *all* citizens to work for a just basic structure.⁴ According to Shelby, this leads to a “status-quo bias” that ignores the comprehensive structural and institutional reforms needed to address the injustices associated with and endemic to “dark ghettos.”

Shelby proposes an alternative approach, namely the “systemic-injustice framework.” Rather than looking at the ghetto in isolation, and blaming deviance from societal norms for its woes, the systemic-injustice framework asks what historical injustices and unjust aspects of the contemporary US order produce

⁴Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, p. 20, defines the “basic structure” as follows: “Within the political realm, the basic structure includes the constitution (which specifies the basic rights and duties of citizenship), the organization of government institutions, and the legal system (including the system of criminal law). Within the economic realm, the basic structure includes the organizational mechanisms (typically markets, firms, banks, and state agencies) that govern the production of goods and provision of services and also the system of private and public ownership that determines rights and responsibilities with respect to goods and resources. And in the social domain, the basic structure includes families and educational institutions, as these ensure that children are cared for and taught what they need to know so that they might eventually become equal participants in the system of social cooperation.”

concentrated disadvantage in marginalized spaces. The systemic-injustice framework therefore shifts the focus of the analysis of ghetto disadvantage from the social-scientific “will it work?” to the normative “is it just?” It refocuses our attention on the moral questions that ghetto poverty raises for all US citizens, including citizens in ghettoized communities, rather than proposing technocratic policy solutions.

For Shelby, the systemic-injustice framework highlights the ways in which contemporary US society fails to secure equality of opportunity for all.⁵ Shelby, following Rawls, uses the normative ideal of society as a fair system of cooperation as an evaluative standard to assess whether basic social, economic, and political institutions are just. He argues that the duties, responsibilities, and rights of each citizen should be determined by a principle of reciprocity. The key question, according to Shelby, is whether individuals *do* their fair share to uphold a system of social cooperation and *receive* their fair share of its fruits. Shelby maintains that all should be able to “share equitably in the advantages of economic cooperation” (p. 171), irrespective of “social hierarchies based on circumstances of birth (race, sex, caste, family, family background, or feudal rank)” (p. 10). Therefore,

the state should (a) ensure that everyone has a real opportunity to develop their talents through education, (b) maintain effective anti-discrimination measures so that all can compete for positions on fair terms, and (c) distribute income and wealth (between families and across generations) in such a way that all can share equitably in the advantages of economic cooperation and that class background is no barrier to achievement. (p. 171)

On this basis, Shelby considers whether the basic social, economic, and political institutions are just. He concludes that the existence of the ghetto as a space of marginalization, poverty, and disadvantage is not compatible with a liberal egalitarian order and violates the principle of reciprocity. Simply put, the ghetto poor are not receiving their fair share of the advantages of a system of social cooperation. In Shelby’s words, “the existence of the dark ghetto—with its combination of racial stigma, neighborhood disadvantage, inadequate schools, fragile families, forced servitude, and shocking incarceration rates—is simply incompatible with any meaningful form of reciprocity among free and equal citizens” (p. 218).

He takes this as a starting point to critique coercive welfare policies that seek to govern the lives of ghetto inhabitants. Under conditions of injustice, *Dark Ghettos* proposes, there are normative restrictions on the type of policies that the

⁵For Shelby, equal opportunity is more than merely the “absence of unjust discrimination”; it mandates that citizens “have equal life prospects.” This means that “one should be able to expect that one’s income and wealth over a lifetime will be similar to that of anyone else who has similar abilities and the same willingness to develop and use them, regardless of the social class one has been born to” (p. 35).

state may implement (p. 5). As long as ghetto residents do not receive their fair share of the advantages of social cooperation, coercive state policies, such as work for welfare requirements, cannot be justified on the basis of a principle of civic reciprocity. According to Shelby, the state may not enforce cultural changes in the ghetto without providing a fair share of the advantages of social cooperation. He argues that ghetto inhabitants not only have the right to resist such unjust state policies, but that such resistance is an expression of dignity and self-respect.

II. LOVE, LABOR, AND PUNISHMENT

Shelby examines three key social, economic, and political institutions: the criminal justice system, work, and the family. In each case, he analyzes policies that target phenomena that are commonly understood as contributing to ghetto poverty, such as crime, joblessness, and single-parent families. In each case, Shelby argues that the state oversteps its legitimate regulatory functions when it seeks to compel the urban poor to change their behavior, rather than providing them with the fair share of societal cooperation.

For example, Shelby rejects the common assumption that the state is justified in condemning and punishing all illegal activity.⁶ He makes two distinct but complementary claims. First, he considers whether ghetto inhabitants have a duty to “respect and abide by the law” (p. 204). He argues that under conditions of intolerable injustice, not all crimes committed by the unjustly disadvantaged are wrong and that “condemning criminal transgressions as a violation of civic duty is misplaced” (p. 220). While Shelby maintains that ghetto inhabitants must follow the law when it coincides with natural duties, he argues that they are not bound to respect the law as such. Thus, citizens in ghettoized communities are not being unreasonable when “they refuse to respect the law and engage in criminal activity” (p. 244).

Second, Shelby assesses “when, if ever, state punishment [is] justified in a context where the state has failed to secure a reasonably just structure” (p. 228). He argues that a state like the USA, which has failed to do a “reasonably good job of maintaining a fair system of social cooperation” (p. 232), lacks legitimate authority to impose obligations beyond natural duties (p. 229). However, the state does retain its enforcement legitimacy to punish “certain harmful wrongdoing” in order to protect others from harm, minimally acts that are “wrongs in themselves” (p. 234). But while the state may have the right to punish those wrongful acts, it is not justified in condemning defiance of legal authority under conditions of injustice (p. 244).

In similar fashion, Shelby critiques welfare-for-work requirements. He argues that, “given that contemporary ghetto poverty is plausibly explained, at least

⁶Shelby’s analysis seems to thread a careful line, critiquing the state’s right to punish without acceding to the more radical demands of the prison abolitionist movement.

in part, by historical injustices in appropriation and transfer (what some term structural racism), it is far from clear that welfare conditional on work, which assumes just background conditions, is justifiable to the black urban poor” (p. 182). Shelby focuses on joblessness, as one of the key economic phenomena that contribute to ghetto poverty (p. 175). Instead of concentrating on the usual lines of argument—whether joblessness in the ghetto is voluntary (due to “ghetto culture”) or involuntary (due to structural factors in the labor market)—he focuses on whether voluntary joblessness can be considered a legitimate form of protest against unjust conditions. He asks whether the state is justified in enforcing work-for-welfare provisions or whether “some blacks might be justified in refusing to accept the jobs available to them” (p. 178).

While Shelby accepts that there is a civic responsibility to work, he argues that ghetto residents can legitimately refuse to fulfill it, based on three objections (p. 190). First, because the basic structure of US society is deeply unjust. Shelby here points to structural racism, a segregated education system, gross inequalities in wealth, racial discrimination in the labor, housing, and lending markets, and racial discrepancies in income, wealth, and life expectancy, among other factors. Ghetto residents can legitimately refuse to comply with work requirements because they do not receive their fair share of the advantages of social cooperation. Second, Shelby argues, ghetto residents can refuse to work because work requirements are exploitative, since they profit from the “labor of people who are compelled to work because of weaknesses and vulnerabilities that are not of their own making” but stem from unjust circumstances, such as “slavery, serfdom, colonial subjugation, and apartheid” (p. 196). Finally, Shelby maintains, ghetto residents can refuse work requirements as a form of expressive harm, since they reinforce stigmatizing stereotypes (pp. 197–200).

Dark Ghettos makes a powerful case against the imposition of work requirements, and convincingly argues that the refusal to work is morally justified. Most importantly, Shelby takes the moral agency of the most marginalized seriously, by arguing that a refusal to work should not be interpreted as an act of deviant social behavior, but as a refusal to submit to unjust conditions.⁷

Shelby’s approach is innovative insofar as it is concerned with defending voluntary joblessness as a form of moral agency in the face of a deeply unjust system that—at best—provides poorly paid, precarious, and highly exploitative work. However, Shelby’s focus on joblessness also has a drawback: it fails to capture the realities and perspectives of women in marginalized communities. Women’s rates of participation in the labor market tend to be higher than men’s,

⁷Shelby’s argument for a right to refuse work would have been even stronger had it incorporated the arguments of many Marxist feminists on the refusal to work. See Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 124; see also “Feminism and the refusal to work: an interview with Kathi Weeks” (2017), <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3400-feminism-and-the-refusal-of-work-an-interview-with-kathi-weeks>>.

and they often face the difficult realities of holding multiple poorly paid jobs at the same time, while also shouldering a disproportionate share of unwaged care labor.⁸ Do women likewise resist such exploitative and precarious work? Are their strategies of resistance also perceived as deviant? Do they challenge or problematize unwaged labor? These questions remain unanswered. Shelby misses an opportunity to make visible the ways in which marginalized black women resist an unjust system that is characterized not merely by racism and economic exploitation, but also by deep and persistent sexism.

There are also some other aspects of Shelby's analysis that implicitly privilege the standpoint of black men. This may be partially explained by the fact that Shelby is trying to defend some of the most heavily criticized forms of behavior; young black men are, after all, often the target of such critiques. However, his account tends to obscure the perspective of black women in marginalized communities. Given Shelby's commitment to "develop[ing] insights from liberal, feminist, and black radical thought to arrive at a systematic account of social injustices along the line of race, gender and class" (p. 4), one would have hoped for a more extensive engagement with questions of domination and oppression along lines of gender.⁹

Consider, for example, Shelby's discussion of child support payments. Shelby makes the radical proposal that, in a just society, fathers should not have to assume the financial burden of child support if they have clearly signaled that they do not want to have children. He argues that parental responsibilities are acquired by "explicitly or implicitly electing to play the role of parent" (p. 150).¹⁰ Whereas women's control over their reproductive decisions, as well as the possibility of giving children up for adoption, means that carrying a fetus to term and assuming parental responsibilities implies a willingness to assume parental duties, Shelby argues, fathering a child when having clearly indicated that one does not intend to do so, does not. As Shelby puts it, "there is sex-based asymmetry in reproductive freedom ... although both men and women contribute to pregnancy, only women, and not the men who impregnate them, have the right to decide whether they will gestate and bear children" (p. 134). A woman who decides to carry a pregnancy to term even though her partner "uses contraception or otherwise makes it explicit that he does not want to father a child ... has been given fair warning that if she bears his biological child, he might not assume the obligation to parent the child" (p. 153). According to Shelby, it is therefore unfair to saddle biological fathers with the financial responsibility for children they

⁸Susan J. Lambert, "Employer practices in low-level hourly jobs: a call for new labor standards," presentation at the Global Capitalism and Work Conference, University of Chicago, April 26–7, 2013.

⁹For an earlier critique of Shelby's analysis of gender, see Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 4, on Shelby's "Justice, deviance, and the dark ghetto," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 35 (2007), 126–60.

¹⁰While we have some doubts as to Shelby's account of parental responsibility, we accept it here for the sake of the argument.

have indicated they do not wish to have.¹¹ Instead, Shelby argues, women are owed the public support that is necessary for them to fulfil their obligations to their children.

Shelby's proposal is clearly motivated by a critique of child support enforcement strategies that criminalize poor black men, and he is understandably critical of such enforcement strategies. He might also be right that we need to fundamentally rethink our approach to parental obligations in a just society. But we would like to reconsider three aspects of Shelby's proposal from the perspective of gender equality. First, the calibration of responsibilities; second, the question of enforceability; and third, the implications of Shelby's argument for unjust societies.¹²

Even if one agrees with the general thrust of Shelby's argument, the calibration of responsibilities appears one-sided. Shelby's criterion for avoiding financial responsibility for an unplanned child is remarkably undemanding. The mere use of contraception or any other explicit indication that one does not want to become a father constitutes a "fair warning" that one might not assume parental responsibility. This seems too permissive for two reasons. First, the fact that one wants to avoid fatherhood does not necessarily imply that one will not assume the duties of fatherhood in the case of accidental pregnancy. Second, given that existing social conventions *do* associate biological fatherhood with financial responsibility, it seems that men should have an obligation to more explicitly discuss their willingness (or lack thereof) to assume parental responsibilities *in the case of an unplanned pregnancy*.

Irrespective of the merits of Shelby's normative argument, it is difficult to see how such an approach to parental obligations could be practically implemented and become legally enforceable without amplifying gendered power imbalances. How would the state determine a couple's agreement prior to pregnancy? Would this not threaten to amplify asymmetrical power relations between men and women by creating numerous "he said/she said" cases? In response to such worries, Shelby has argued that maybe the state should always side with women in cases of disagreement. For example, courts could assume that there *was* agreement to assume parental responsibility in the case of an unplanned pregnancy in the absence of written evidence to the contrary. However, this would undermine the impact of such a change in policy, since it seems unlikely that many people will have signed legally binding papers prior to unplanned pregnancies.

From the perspective of gender equality, moreover, worries about the practical implications of Shelby's proposal extend beyond questions of enforceability. Shelby here mobilizes an ideal-theory account in order to consider what corrective

¹¹Shelby does, however, argue that biological fathers may be responsible for "mother support" (i.e., supporting women throughout the pregnancy or paying for the costs of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy).

¹²In fact, one might argue that the burden should be reversed entirely: i.e., men who do not want to become fathers should ascertain whether the women they sleep with are willing to terminate an accidental pregnancy.

justice requires. It remains somewhat unclear, however, what exactly this implies under conditions of injustice—specifically, it remains unclear whether the enforcement of child support payments should be abolished in the present-day USA. For example, Shelby’s argument presupposes easy access to contraception and safe abortions.¹³ What does this mean for a world in which women’s reproductive decisions are often severely constrained and increasingly under pressure? Similarly, Shelby argues that the state ought to provide mothers with the support and opportunities that they require in order to fulfil their obligations to their children. But Shelby himself acknowledges that “in the absence of structural reform, if men had the freedom to decide whether to accept the role of parent ... this would obviously impose enormous burdens on mothers and would worsen gender inequality” (p. 163). Structural reforms that rectify the disadvantage that single mothers face are urgently needed and we welcome Shelby’s reminder that we risk falling into “status quo bias” if we do not address these structural injustices (p. 163). But what do we do in the absence of such structural reforms? Should we impose such burdens on women and children in order to rectify an injustice to unwilling biological fathers? What does justice require in circumstances in which such structural reform seems either unlikely or simply a long way off?¹⁴ These are, admittedly, tremendously difficult questions. But engaging with these questions would have allowed Shelby to give more weight to the concerns and issues that women face.

Of course, this does not imply that the issues that Shelby problematizes—namely the criminalization of young black men through aggressive child support enforcement—should simply be relegated to the waiting room of history. But such outcomes can be achieved by means that are less likely to seriously jeopardize the aim of gender equality. For example, one could significantly reduce or even abolish child support payments for low-income non-custodial parents and introduce guidelines that take precarious employment conditions into account. One could likewise make sure that the state does not abuse child support enforcement in order to recoup welfare costs by abolishing the requirement to identify the biological father for women who are on welfare. Such reforms could be justified by relying exclusively on an argument that Shelby mentions in passing—namely, that the enforcement of child support payments cannot be justified to those who have been denied the “rights, opportunities and resources to which they are entitled.”¹⁵

¹³We do not mean to imply that Shelby *assumes* such access exists, but merely that his argument proceeds on the assumption that such access would exist under just conditions.

¹⁴Shelby does engage with the question of what the oppressed owe to each other, to a certain extent, by suggesting that all black men in disadvantaged neighborhoods have a duty of solidarity to help support single mothers. But this is presumably intended to occur against the background of more fundamental changes to the support single mothers receive from the state.

¹⁵Shelby makes this argument with regards to those men who have agreed to take on parental duties, but do not pay child support (p. 169). He argues that, even in such cases, the enforcement of child support payments may not be justified.

Shelby's discussion of rap as a form of political dissent similarly omits a full engagement with the perspective of women. Shelby defends hip hop as a form of valid and valuable political dissent. He argues that "normatively transgressive" (p. 253) hip hop is often ignored or dismissed out of hand as meaningless, immoral, or politically vacuous. Shelby addresses two critiques in particular. First, he argues that hip hop *should* be taken seriously as a form of political dissent, despite its "moral and political impurities," such as rampant materialism, the celebration of violence and lawlessness, as well as misogyny and homophobia (p. 270). Second, Shelby defends hip hop against charges that it is politically meaningless as long as it does not seek to effect change (p. 255).

With regards to the former, Shelby argues that *some* of the morally transgressive and politically problematic characteristics of hip hop are "part of the point" (p. 270). Specifically, Shelby interprets the celebration of lawlessness as a "public declaration that positive law ... has no normative force, at least not for the ghetto poor" (p. 270). Shelby then tackles the argument that hip hop is politically defeatist because it is deeply skeptical about conventional politics and/or does not aim to bring about social change. Against such charges, Shelby argues that impure dissent constitutes a valuable form of political dissent insofar as it can express a form of "symbolic exit": that is, an explicit public refusal to submit to an unjust social order. Instead, Shelby argues, we should recognize impure dissent as a "valuable public act of protest, a meaningful mode of resistance to injustice, an affirmation of self-respect" and a declaration of solidarity with the oppressed (p. 272). It is, Shelby affirms, "a vital element of the political ethics of the oppressed" (p. 273). In order to appreciate it as such, he maintains, we must recognize that "the political morality of dissent includes non-instrumental elements that are purely expressive" (p. 273). According to Shelby, such "purely expressive acts" (p. 274) convey resistance to an unjust political regime, even if they do not seek to bring about change or are fundamentally skeptical about the very possibility of meaningful social change.

Shelby makes a convincing case for taking hip hop seriously as a form of valid and valuable political dissent. But while he successfully addresses charges of political vacuity or cynicism, he does not fully engage black feminist critiques of hip hop (p. 258). He only briefly mentions misogyny and homophobia as examples of "impurities." Feminist critics, such as Joan Morgan, Imani Perry, and Tricia Rose, have offered complex assessments of hip hop as an aesthetic, expressive, communal, and political praxis. At the same time, however, they have called attention to the ways in which hip hop has been gendered as an art form, both in the ways in which it portrays women and in terms of the constraints it puts on women's voices.¹⁶ The problem, for many feminist critics, is not that

¹⁶Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-hop Feminist* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008).

some forms of hip hop “diverge sharply from conventional or widely held normative standards” (p. 156). The problem is that it aligns *too closely* with values and norms that are very much mainstream—namely, the norming or exclusion of women’s voices and the objectification, denigration, and commodification of women’s bodies. This has given rise to debates about if, and if so how, contemporary hip hop, particularly in its more commercialized form, continues to be, is, or can be made into a source for self-respect *for* black women and a declaration of solidarity *with* black women—questions that would have complicated Shelby’s justification of hip hop on the basis of an expression of self-respect and a declaration of solidarity with the oppressed.

III. ABOLISHING THE GHETTO

As we mentioned at the beginning of the article, Shelby’s call for ghetto abolitionism is part of a tradition that regards the existence of ghettos as a result and visible reminder of the *systemic* injustices in contemporary US society. Shelby is clear that ghetto abolitionism requires fundamental changes to the basic structure of US society, and calls for robust anti-discrimination policies, a more equitable distribution of societal wealth, broad redistributive policies (p. 47), the abolition of class stratification, full employment, and meaningful work (pp. 77, 193).

However, the nature of the existing capitalist social order remains underspecified. Both the structural tendencies and limits of the existing socio-economic order and the outlines of a political economy capable of realizing Shelby’s vision are left unexplored. Such considerations may, as Shelby argues, exceed the boundaries of philosophical inquiry (p. 6). We would nonetheless like to consider them here, in order to think about the political implications of Shelby’s vision of a more just society.

In the following, we argue that thinking about the possibilities for realizing Shelby’s vision of racial and economic justice requires the development of an analytical framework that accounts for the articulation of capitalism and white supremacy. We will first show why we need such an account and what it means for Shelby’s vision of racial and economic justice. We will then sketch an outline of such an approach that understands white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy as *articulated systems of domination*.

There are aspects of Shelby’s “systematic account of social injustices” (p. 5) that seem to point beyond a capitalist order, such as his demand for the abolition of class stratification. More often, however, Shelby’s vision of a more just society seems to call for an enlarged and more inclusive welfare state, presumably backed by Keynesian economic policy. If that is indeed what Shelby has in mind in *Dark Ghettos*, what would it mean to take this seriously as a political project in the face of a decades-long decline of the welfare state?

The welfare state has, historically, constituted a social compact that has ensured at least a modicum of equality in the distribution of income and wealth. However, this social compact has proven rather precarious in the last decades. Since the 1970s, the welfare state has undergone a precipitous decline.¹⁷ This decline has gone hand in hand with the weakening of organized labor, the deregulation of markets, and the rise of the financial sector. High levels of state debt have exposed states to the vicissitudes of the bond markets, including demands for the imposition of austerity, while the increased mobility of global capital has led to increasingly grotesque competitions for capital investments, often resulting in a shrinking tax base.¹⁸ Overall, then, states increasingly find themselves under pressure from capital.

While some attribute this development primarily to an ideological shift—the neoliberal turn—the weakness of the democratically governed capitalist welfare state is at least partially attributable to *structural* crises and tensions that resulted from the mediating role that the welfare state took on. It assumed, as Greta Krippner has argued, “responsibility both for providing direction to the economy and for managing the social consequences of growth.”¹⁹ Deteriorating economic conditions in the 1960s and 1970s (slower growth and higher unemployment) made the state vulnerable to competing pressures by capital and the citizenry.²⁰

Such conflicting demands tend to produce two short-term solutions: either to shift distributional conflicts to markets²¹ or to resolve them through increasing levels of state debt.²² Both of these short-term solutions, however, have undermined the state’s control over the economy and its ability to redistribute effectively, as states now routinely find themselves confronted with demands for fiscal discipline and calls for further cutbacks to welfare provisions.

In the USA, moreover, the rollback of the welfare state has been greatly facilitated by the deployment of white supremacist rhetoric. Racialized figures such as the “welfare queen”, “black youth gangbangers,” and “super-predators,” for example, were routinely mobilized in order to justify cuts to welfare programs. They contributed to the racialized stigmatization of welfare and bolstered the substitution of coercive control for a social safety net.²³

We can therefore identify two sources of structural vulnerability in the welfare state: one attributable to the conflicts that the logic of capital tends to generate in democratically governed welfare states, the other to the logics of white supremacy. What is at stake here, then, is the relationship between white supremacy and capitalism or, more specifically, the question of how white supremacy and

¹⁷Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, 2nd edn, trans. Patrick Camiller and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017), p. 149.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁹Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 16.

²⁰*Buying Time*, p. 23.

²¹Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis*, p. 22.

²²Streeck, *Buying Time*, p. 36.

²³David Wilson, *Cities and Race: America’s New Black Ghettos* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

capitalism are articulated with each other in ways that frustrate the emancipatory aims of racial and economic justice.

The emergent “racial capitalism” literature seeks to explicate the ways in which white supremacy and a capitalist social order are imbricated and can be mutually reinforcing. A substantial body of scholarship has focused on the ways in which racial hierarchies are functional for capitalist social orders. Some have even argued that capitalism is intrinsically and inextricably linked to racial hierarchies. Jodi Melamed, for example, argues that “the term ‘racial capitalism’ requires us to recognize that capitalism *is* racial capitalism.” Capital, she argues, “can only be accumulated by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups ... Procedures of racialization and capitalism are ultimately never separable from each other.”²⁴ We value this point of view and take the concept of racial capitalism as a starting point. However, we propose a conceptualization of the relationship between white supremacy and capitalism that understands them as *articulated systems of domination* rather than as intrinsically linked. The conception of articulated systems of domination draws on Anne McClintock’s notion of “articulated social categories.” McClintock argues that “no social category exists in privileged isolation; each comes into being in social relation to other categories, if in uneven and contradictory ways.”²⁵ Since race, gender, and class are categories that “come into existence *in and through* relation to each other ... [they] can be called articulated categories.”²⁶

Unlike McClintock, however, we propose a framework of mutually articulated systems of domination rather than “social categories.” We contend that these systems develop semi-autonomous logics. While white supremacy and patriarchy often are functional for capitalist economies, for example, they can also come into conflict with the logics of capital and generate tensions, crises, and contradictions. We propose to call the specific articulation between the three systems of domination in a given era a *regime of articulation*.

There are at least two key ways in which the white supremacist and capitalist orders have been mutually reinforcing. First, white supremacy has been mobilized both in order to safeguard or maximize profitability and in order to mitigate economic crises and distributional conflicts. Racial hierarchies have been mobilized in order to secure entry to markets, redistribute property—both by legal means and by means of extralegal violence—and maximize profitability

²⁴Jodi Melamed, “Racial capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 1 (2015), 76–85, at p. 77, emphasis original. Racial capitalism, in contemporary parlance, has served as a rallying cry and meeting point for academics and activists who seek to combine an analysis of white supremacy with an analysis of the capitalist social order. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson first defined racial capitalism as follows: “The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term ‘racial capitalism’ to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency”; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London: Zed Press, 2000), p. 2.

²⁵Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 9.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4, emphasis original.

in capitalist markets. As Ida B. Wells and many other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black activists and writers documented, the naked violence of Jim Crow—from both the state and white citizens—was used to dispossess black individuals and communities. This occurred through brutal violence, including lynchings and pogroms (such as the 1921 attack on Tulsa Oklahoma’s black community), as well as through confiscation and fraud backed by the racial state.

Less visibly, the racial state has often backed the racial segmentation of markets, including housing, labor, and credit markets, which has led to the super-exploitation and heightened precarity of black and brown labor.²⁷ Mario Barrera, for example, has argued that black and brown labor forces were particularly vulnerable—not least because they were often excluded from organized labor—and thus constituted a segment of the population that could be used as a disposable reserve army.²⁸ This “reserve army” could be laid off easily in a slack economy and paid substandard wages when employed.

Racial hierarchies, therefore, can be, and often have been, functional for capitalist economies. They can be mobilized in order to maximize profit, and serve to mitigate conflicts between (white) labor and capital. However, this does not mean that white supremacy and capitalism produce a totalizing system of domination. White supremacy and capital can also develop antagonistic tendencies and conflicting demands that threaten the status quo. Destin Jenkins, for example, shows us how the policies pursued by white Alabama elites during their successful attempt to overturn Reconstruction were detrimental to the functioning of capital markets in the early twentieth century.²⁹ Barrera provides another example: white workers frustrated employers’ attempts to use workers of Mexican descent as a reserve labor force, by enforcing the exclusion of Mexican workers.³⁰ While such crises often merely result in a reconfiguration of the regime of articulation, they can also provide possibilities for political intervention. The destabilization of an articulated system of domination makes oppressive structures visible, and, in some cases, can provide an opportunity to problematize the structural outcomes of articulated systems of oppression.

As an analytical framework, the articulated systems of domination approach allows us to think politically about the obstacles and pressures to which emancipatory movements for racial and economic justice will likely be subject, and calls for an analysis of the current articulation of white supremacy and

²⁷It should be pointed out that, while there is merit to the analysis of the super-exploitation of black and brown labor, questions of gender remained undertheorized. The status of black and brown women workers—both waged and unwaged—was a key feature only of the political economy produced by feminists of color. While there were exceptions, this characterization is valid for the vast majority of theorists, as well as for analyses produced by twentieth-century black radical organizations.

²⁸Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

²⁹Destin Jenkins, “Forged fetters upon their own hands and feet”: debt, propaganda, and the New South,” MS, n.d.

³⁰Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest*.

capitalism in order to identify weak points in their mutual articulation that make gains for emancipatory movements possible. Adopting the articulated systems of domination framework therefore helps us theorize the contradictions that aid and hinder progressive political mobilization as a result of partially conflicting sets of privileges and oppressions that, in turn, help us explain historically contingent patterns of conflict and cooperation.

IV. A BLACK RADICAL CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

For some in the black radical tradition, the mutual articulation of white supremacy and capitalism has proven so stable, historically speaking, that it inspired a profound skepticism about the possibilities of ever realizing the aims of racial and economic justice in a capitalist social order. In the early twentieth century, for example, the African Blood Brotherhood and the black members of the Communist Party USA insisted that black liberation was unachievable under capitalism—a position shared a generation later by the Black Panther Party and the Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement.

James Boggs argued that the marginalization and impoverishment of black spaces was inseparable from a capitalist order: “We cannot look at the underdevelopment of the black community separately from capitalism any more than we can look at the development of racism separately from capitalism.”³¹ Boggs insisted that the elimination of economic and racial injustice requires the dismantling of capitalism, not fuller and more equal participation in the capitalist order. According to Boggs, the racialized distribution and control of wealth and the means of production could not be resolved within a system governed by profit maximization. He foresaw a continual exploitation of the precarious economic situation of black communities—first and foremost, but not exclusively, in the labor market. Thus, for Boggs, as for many in the black radical tradition, capitalism itself was a barrier to overcoming white supremacy. He therefore argued that black liberation required the “social ownership and control by the black community” of land, property, and the means of production, distribution, and communication,³² as well as novel ways of distributing societal wealth, including guaranteed basic income.

The question of whether ghetto abolitionism can be achieved within the parameters of a capitalist social order has recently resurfaced in black movement politics. Black Lives Matter activists, for example, are trying to think through the relationship between the deprivation and vulnerability of black communities and the structural features of a capitalist system.

These questions, we argue, deserve to be taken seriously and require an open and experimental discussion about the political economy of black liberation. In

³¹See James Boggs, *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), Kindle loc. 4105.

³²*Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 4281.

particular, we should consider whether current economic institutions can be made just, both in the distributive (can they eradicate racial economic inequality, as well as economic inequality in general?) and the emancipatory sense (can they bring about a form of work that is both meaningful and substantially autonomous?). Consequently, we argue that the debate should seriously consider alternative economic forms and institutions, and seek to assess their viability.

This should include considering demands for economic self-determination. We should grapple honestly with black demands for more democratic economic institutions, as well as discuss the merits of black economic self-determination. One of the questions that should be open for political contestation is what kinds of economic arrangements and economic institutions ghetto residents want to participate in. Equal access to formal labor markets and equal educational opportunities are clearly important short-term goals. But that should not constrain the political imagination with regards to normatively desirable and pragmatically feasible economic arrangements.

The demand for self-determination also contains potentially radical democratic possibilities. In racially marginalized communities, it has the potential to enable democratic world making. World making is fundamental to the political tasks necessary for achieving racial justice. To be democratic, this world making must take a bottom-up approach to democratic debate. It may eventually consolidate around statist solutions, but, given the predations of the racial state, democratic deliberation within marginalized and disadvantaged black communities must have the ability, if desired, to coalesce around non-statist, autonomous, local solutions to the injustices with which these communities contend. In the past, the demand for self-determination mobilized blacks within the USA to come together to debate their future—to debate the sources of their oppression, how should they organize, who are their allies; and how the economy, the state, and civil society should be organized in order to facilitate black liberation. In short, to *debate what type of world these communities need and want to make.*

V. CONCLUSION

At its best, the black radical tradition was capable of visualizing societies organized far more justly, while simultaneously devising pragmatic tactics and strategies to achieve those goals, based on a realistic assessment of the present. Our present moment calls for a return to such an integrated debate. Shelby has written an impassioned indictment of the systemic injustices that produce “dark ghettos” and a powerful plaidoyer for recognizing and respecting the moral and political agency of ghetto residents. *Dark Ghettos* offers a sustained and rigorous critique of the way in which the ghetto poor are governed, and makes a strong case against many coercive state anti-poverty policies.

In this article, we have sought to both critique and build on Shelby’s account. First, we have argued that Shelby’s analysis tends to fall short with regards

to questions of gender inequality and gender oppression. Second, the account of the nature, structural tendencies, and limits of the existing system remains underspecified in Shelby's analysis. *Dark Ghettos* ends with an invitation to a broader debate about the transformations that are necessary to abolish the ghetto. In this spirit, we have here sought to present a framework for analyzing the structural forces that have, in the past, constrained struggles for the realization of economic and racial justice.

We have argued that we should understand white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism as mutually articulated systems of domination. The articulation of capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy should be a focal point of our analyses, in order to understand the origins of ghettoized communities, to identify the multiple political and economic crises that confront us, and to recognize potential opportunities to launch political movements that have a realistic chance of ending the articulation of the three systems of domination—a necessary condition for ghetto abolition. While the articulation of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy can be, and often has been, functional for maintaining the status quo, regimes of articulation also give rise to fissures, frictions, and contradictions between these forms of oppression. Such crisis moments can be moments that further entrench exploitative logics, but they can also become moments of political imagination and mobilization; moments that allow for the creation of new political horizons.