# Critical Dialogue

**Rethinking Racial Justice**. By Andrew Valls. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 256p. $99.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.
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Any discussion of *Rethinking Racial Justice* should begin by reflecting on Andrew Valls's moving tribute to his former Morehouse College students and colleagues. In his acknowledgments, Valls reveals, "My students challenged me to show them how some of the rather abstract theories on my syllabi applied to the 'real world' and to the concerns of African Americans in particular" (p. ix). Valls's indebtedness to his tenure at Morehouse highlights the book's two greatest strengths. The first is his ability to make liberal political thought relevant to some of the most pressing contemporary social justice issues facing blacks in American society. The second is his forceful argument for the preservation of black institutions, neighborhoods, and schools, which he makes by pushing back against the moral imperative for integration. Valls should be proud of his work in *Rethinking Racial Justice*, because it more than lives up to the challenge set forth by the students of Morehouse College.

Valls explains that the impetus for writing *Rethinking Racial Justice* was the lack of a "cogent conception of racial justice." He writes, "We need a renewed sense of urgency about the problems of racial injustice, one that has not existed since the civil rights movement, and we also need a conception of racial justice to guide our thought and action" (p. 10). Valls sets about filling this void by developing a "distinctively liberal approach to the problem of racial inequality" (p. 12). In the first several chapters, he applies his distinctively liberal approach to issues such as reparations, collective memory, and affirmative action. What makes Valls's approach unique is that he melds liberal political theory with the principles of transitional justice. He notes, "The main argument for measures of transitional justice is that to leave the consequences of the past unaddressed is to (implicitly) condone the past, or at least to fail to repudiate it. Failure to confront the past is, in effect, to leave in place its unjust effects and hence suggests continuity rather than rupture, approval rather than disavowal, continuation rather than transition" (p. 30). According to Valls, the United States underwent a regime change during the civil rights movement with little to no redress for the wrongs of the past regime. A strength of *Rethinking Racial Justice* is its compelling argument that proper redress should not only serve as the basis of a case for reparations but also highlights the need for a collective grappling with the past and a justice-based defense of affirmative action.

Although the demand for reparations, collective memory, and affirmative action may appear to be preconditions for the full integration of black Americans into white society, Valls, in the remaining chapters of the book, draws a different conclusion. Instead, he trains his attention on vanquishing the moral imperative for integration that is often advocated by other liberal theorists. The strength of Valls's arguments hinges on his ability to focus on the structural causes of social justice issues, such as residential segregation, the mass incarceration of black Americans, and the preponderance of failing schools in black neighborhoods. By focusing on the structural causes of these issues, Valls strips away the false dichotomy undergirding moral arguments for integration. For instance, he objects to mobility programs that offer individuals residing in hyper-segregated and deeply impoverished black neighborhoods a choice to move to less poor neighborhoods with better schools. As Valls notes, "Given this choice, it is not surprising that many volunteer. But this set of options is inherently coercive and unjustly so" (p. 141). Because of his liberal commitments, Valls does not support these deconcentration programs precisely because they are coercive. To make this point he argues that "we should interpret 'involuntarily' broadly, to include not only policies that force people to move, but also those that offer moving as a 'choice,' when the alternatives are so skewed that the decision to move cannot plausibly be seen as voluntary" (p. 142). To be clear, Valls never argues against integration altogether. Rather, he thinks initiatives that promote integration should be just one approach among others designed to transform underlying structural inequities. Valls is to be commended for his ability to forcefully and persuasively defend black institutions, neighborhoods, and schools from a distinctively liberal approach.

Despite the many strengths of *Rethinking Racial Justice*, the book does have a few shortcomings. For starters, the

title is a bit of a misnomer. That is, readers who are looking to engage in a wide-ranging discussion of racial justice will be disappointed that Valls is primarily concerned with analyzing racial justice only as it pertains to black Americans (something he fully acknowledges). More importantly, though, is the lack of consistency in Valls's voice. For instance, in those chapters in which Valls is resisting the moral imperative for integration, he carefully and forcefully argues for his positions. In contrast, his chapters on collective memory and mass incarceration are written passively and draw tepid conclusions. Consequently, these chapters belie the exigency Valls claims is necessary for our contemporary moment. This is exemplified by Valls's own summation of the chapter on collective memory: "I have generally avoided drawing hard-and-fast conclusions about the requirements of justice in this chapter. Instead, my concern has been to insist that justice requires some confrontation with the past and some acknowledgment of it, in order to create an appropriate collective memory that affirms the civic and moral equality of all" (p. 74). It is hard to see how the demand for an urgent and cogent conception of racial justice merely requires "some" confrontation with and acknowledgment of the past, yet does not provide recommendations to alleviate the injustice it bequeaths to us today.

Likewise, Valls acknowledges that readers may find the normative conclusions he draws in his chapter on criminal justice to be "too limited." After this admission, however, he dedicates the chapter's last paragraph to a quick dismissal of the prison abolition movement, writing, "Although I agree with much of the abolition movement's assessment of the criminal justice system as it operates today, I find its prescription unpersuasive." He adds, "Alternatives to incarceration should certainly be expanded. Yet without a plausible alternative to prisons for even the most serious offenders, calling for abolition is unrealistic" (p. 175). This is an oversimplification of the highly nuanced position adopted by thinkers in the prison abolition movement. One wishes that Valls would have treated the arguments and policy prescriptions of the prison abolition movement with the same thoughtfulness and care that he extends to liberal integrationists. By doing so, students of Morehouse College—and any reader of this book—would have greatly benefited from knowing how a robust and distinctively liberal approach either coheres or significantly departs from the abolition movement. Thus, Valls misses an opportunity to engage advocates of a contemporary movement that is compelling and extremely relevant to many young black Americans.

Valls's discussion of gentrification is another disappointingly truncated engagement with an important facet of contemporary racial justice. After compellingly arguing against the involuntary nature of deconcentration initiatives, Valls's liberal argument seems to fold in on itself when he turns to gentrification. He acknowledges that, not unlike deconcentration initiatives, "gentrification can create its own coercive pressures that essentially force urban residents to move" (p. 149). He then proposes some policy solutions that could possibly stem the tide of full-scale displacement of black Americans. However, he eventually capitulates, admitting that a distinctively liberal framework cannot protect black communities from the coercive forces of gentrification. "This does pose a challenge: how do we protect the character of black neighborhoods while also protecting the freedom of their residents to move out and the freedom of others to move in?" He continues, "There is an irresolvable tension in any view that values both individual autonomy and also communities of affinity. Public policy cannot preserve the character of communities indefinitely, but it can slow the pace of change and protect residents from some of the effects of that change" (p. 150). Valls is correct—perhaps there is no silver bullet that can be offered up by a distinctively liberal approach to the issue of gentrification. With this admission, however, Valls demonstrates the severe limitations of a liberal framework in the quest for an urgent and cogent conception of racial justice.

Ultimately, *Rethinking Racial Justice* offers an insightful and valuable contribution to contemporary political theory. Valls breathes life into political liberalism, which despite its shortcomings, still has much to offer those interested in pursuing racial equality. Even if one does not agree with Valls's perspective on all matters, readers will gain tremendously from his masterful overview and incisive analysis of every subject covered in the book.

### Response to Justin Rose's Review of *Rethinking Racial Justice*

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— Andrew Valls

I wish to thank Justin Rose for his fine review of *Rethinking Racial Justice*. It is gratifying to know that, in his judgment, some of the book's ambitions have been realized, and it is no surprise to learn that it nevertheless has some loose ends, underexplored connections, and unfinished business. Rose is an astute reader, and he has no trouble picking out the latter. The book is ambitious in its scope, perhaps overly so, and seeks to integrate large literatures across a number of disciplines into an outline of a conception of racial justice. It was not feigned humility that led me to write in the introduction that the book is "a modest contribution to the (collective) endeavor of developing such a conception" (p. 15).

Rose focuses some of his critique on the conclusions of two chapters where I acknowledge issues germane to the chapters but do not explore them in detail. I do not disagree that my discussion of gentrification is "disappointingly truncated." The issue deserves more attention

than it has received from political theorists and philosophers, including me. And it is true that I do not engage the literature on prison abolition. Yet I wish that Rose had discussed the arguments that I make about race and mass incarceration, racial bias and racial profiling in the criminal justice system, excessive criminal sentences (and the racial disparities therein), and the role of the "collateral consequences" of a criminal record in perpetuating racial inequality.

Rose's critique of my discussion of collective memory does engage arguments that I make. In that chapter I argue that liberal theory has a great deal to say about the requirements of collective memory in the wake of historic injustice. I argue that the state may not convey the message that some citizens have greater moral or civic worth than others, and in a context shaped by massive injustice based on such a claim, the state is under a positive obligation to affirm the equal status and dignity of all. The state ought to engage in the cultivation of collective memory—through truth commissions, apologies, civil rights memorials and museums, and the like—that conveys this message. And it may not express the opposite, as it does through the public display of the Confederate Battle Flag and many Confederate monuments.

Hence, in stating that "I have generally avoided drawing hard-and-fast conclusions" in the chapter, I do not mean to suggest that I draw no conclusions whatsoever. I do draw some, and they are not trivial, because I am arguing both against those who think that liberal theory has no resources to address these kinds of issues and against those who take a different view of what the state may and may not do. But on these issues theorizing about justice can only take us so far. Does justice require a truth commission of a particular kind? An apology with precise wording? A certain civil rights museum, with specific exhibits? I think that justice requires some such undertakings, but it is harder to see how justice can require "a particular monument, situated just so in a particular site, bearing specific words on its plaque" (p. 74).

In my subsequent work on Confederate monuments, I attempt to come to firmer conclusions than I do in my brief treatment of them in the book (see "What Should Become of Confederate Monuments? A Normative Framework," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 33, 2019). But even here I am limited by the nature of the subject matter. Confederate monuments are an extremely large and diverse set of objects. One can argue (as I hope I have successfully) that if a public monument conveys nostalgia for the era of de jure racial hierarchy, then it is incompatible with the duty of the state to affirm the equal dignity of all, and it must therefore be removed or at least augmented so that it no longer conveys that message. Many of the most prominent Confederate monuments, in my view, satisfy the antecedent of that conditional statement. But the difficulty is not only that there are limits to the level of specificity that a conception of justice can reach but also that some of the issues raised by Confederate monuments are as much hermeneutic as they are normative. What message does a particular monument express? While a conception of racial justice can provide some guidance on these matters, in any particular case much depends on interpretation and ultimately democratic politics.

**The Drum Major Instinct: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Theory of Political Service**. By Justin Rose. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019. 132p. $99.95 cloth, $28.95 paper.
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Justin Rose's new book is part of a broader growing interest in the study of Martin Luther King Jr. among contemporary political theorists and philosophers and is an important contribution to our understanding of King's political thought. Rose focuses on what he calls King's theory of service, which turns out to touch on many of the major themes in King's thought, such as integration and nonviolence. King's theory, on Rose's account, is extremely demanding, requiring much more than the "apolitical and voluntary action" (p. 4) that has come to be associated with the Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday as a "Day of Service." In offering this interpretation of King, Rose joins other scholars in decrying the safe, sanitized, "deradicalized mythos of King" (p. 4) that has come to dominate popular portrayals of him and even some academic accounts.

Much of Rose's reading is framed by a series of sermons that King gave titled "Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." On Rose's reading, King argued that "a fully three-dimensional life requires love of oneself (length) be complemented by serving others (breadth) and searching for God (height)" (p. 17). The first dimension, if not tempered by the other two, becomes the basis for a drive, in King's words, "to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade" (p. 2). This is the "drum major instinct" of the book's title, and it must transformed so that our conception of individual greatness is measured by the second dimension: the ways and extent to which we serve others. Service to others, however, does not mean merely giving to the less fortunate. Rather, King's political theory of service requires that service be directed at transforming oneself, transforming others, and, crucially, combating structural injustice (p. 22). It is this far-reaching and deeply political understanding of service, directed at the roots of inequality, that places King in the "black radical tradition" (p. 8).

As an interpretation of King, Rose's account brings together many themes in his thought in a compelling and often attractive way. Yet Rose's ambition for the book

is to provide not only an account of King's theory of political service but also "a resource for those engaged in contemporary struggles for justice" (p. 99). That is, his goal is not merely interpretation and explication; he wants to suggest that King has something to teach us about political service and, more generally, about theory and activism around racism and structural injustice. These latter ambitions, however, are never fully realized: achieving them would require both a more critical approach to King's thought and a greater effort to place him in dialogue with our contemporary condition, as well as scholars and activists reflecting on it. Throughout, Rose does not so much defend or criticize King's theory (as he interprets it), but simply presents that theory. The book's normative aspirations and its contributions to contemporary thought are largely implicit and gestured at, rather than developed and argued for. And yet making the case that King's thought should inform and inspire contemporary reflection and activism around racial justice (and structural injustice more generally) depends on establishing that King was importantly right about certain things—and that his diagnoses and prescriptions carry over from his time to ours.

This is an issue when it comes to aspects of King's thought that seem problematic and hence liable to criticism, or at least in need of defense. For example, as Rose shows, King argued that better-off African Americans have a duty to their less well-off kin to engage in political activism for fundamental change. King wrote, "There must be a climate of social pressure in the Negro community that scorns the Negro who will not pick up his citizenship rights and add his strength enthusiastically and voluntarily to the accumulation of power for himself and his people" (p. 54). Rose immediately adds, "Perhaps no sentence better captures the goal of King's use of the American dream…. King was trying to create a climate of social pressure that forced his fellow Americans, especially black Americans, to take up their responsibility to serve their nation by collectively transforming themselves, others, and structures of injustice" (pp. 54–55). This raises important issues. How are African Americans to force each other to engage in political activism? What forms may such coercion take? Who may exert it? To what extent? Is this call for social pressure that "scorns" those who are not sufficiently active compatible with King's generally liberal commitments? These questions have been explored and debated by contemporary scholars (Tommie Shelby comes immediately to mind), and the account of King offered here would have been greatly enriched by engaging this more recent literature. Yet the sentence by Rose quoted earlier is the end of the discussion. Rose's endorsement of King's position is implied, but only implied—and its implications and applications are not developed.

This issue of how King is to inform and inspire contemporary thought and action is raised in an even more fundamental way by Rose's treatment of the Christian premises of King's thought. Rose quite rightly emphasizes the Christian framework in which King operated, as well as "the centrality of God to King's theory of political service" (p. 59). Hence, in his discussion on the relation between hope and activism, Rose not only argues that activism requires hope but he also shows definitively that, for King, faith in God provided that hope. Rose then uses the reflections of Ta-Nehisi Coates as a foil to King, because, he argues, Coates's lack of faith in God undermines the hope necessary for activism. Whereas King never lost his faith that God was on the side of those fighting for justice, Coates writes that he has "no sense that any just God [is] on my side" (p. 73). Coates's "rejection of a Christian God" means that he has "no God to hold me up" (p. 76).

Rose sees Coates's atheism and hopelessness as obstacles to activism, and perhaps they are. Yet Rose never explains what the source of the hope necessary for activism should be for people who do not share King's Christian faith or even his theism. What are people to do if they do not agree that "humans possess a telos to seek God" (p. 62)? Rose is aware of this problem, but he does not fully grapple with it, seemingly content instead to merely suggest that such sources of hope can be "psychological, emotional, or spiritual" (p. 76). In the concluding paragraph of this discussion, he writes, "The objective of this chapter is not to suggest that all contemporary black Americans need to believe in a Christian God. Rather, in addition to exploring the linkage between hope and agency in King's theory of political service, the goal has been to highlight the dangers of not having sufficient resources to sustain contemporary black Americans in the long and arduous battle against structural injustice" (p. 76). But if contemporary activists "need to generate a sense of hope that exercising collective political agency can make a difference" (p. 76) and King's faith in God is not available to them, where else should they look? We are only left to wonder. Rose says nothing to help us resist the conclusion that, in the absence of faith in a just God, Coates's pessimism is justified.

This problem goes beyond the issues of hope, agency, and activism. The fundamental questions raised by Rose's book are whether and how King's theory of political service can inform activism today. King lived, thought, and wrote at a time when he could easily take for granted the notion that the United States was a predominantly Christian nation, and indeed this shared Christianity provided a basis for common ground, even with those who disagreed with him. Yet today King's appeals to Christianity would seem to be far more parochial and unappealing to those of other faiths or of no faith at all. In this sense, King's thought is not an obvious source of inspiration for political activism in our more diverse society. In short, is King's theory of political service so grounded in his Christian worldview that it cannot form the basis for activism in our more pluralistic society? If not,



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which aspects of his thought can be decoupled from their Christian foundations so as to ground a shared commitment to collective action across sectional lines?

Rose has provided a detailed, well-researched, and nuanced portrait of King's theory of political service, one that brings together many aspects of his thought into one coherent and often attractive whole. In this review I have focused on the issues where I think more needs to be said, and I am eager to see how Rose addresses the questions that I have raised—both in his response here (all 500 words of it!) and, I hope, in his future work.

### Response to Andrew Valls's Review of *The Drum Major Instinct: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Theory of Political Service*

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— Justin Rose

I thank Andrew Valls for his thoughtful engagement with my book. His principal critique is that my book never quite realizes the aim of developing and arguing for what I claim are normative contributions that King's theory of service can make to contemporary activists in the struggle for structural justice. Specifically, Valls highlights my discussion of King's call for social pressure to be exerted on those unwilling to discharge their responsibility to engage in collective action, as well as my discussion of the need for contemporary activists to identify sources robust enough to sustain their struggle in the face of existential violence. In both instances, Valls suggests that the underdevelopment of my arguments makes a less compelling case that King's "diagnoses and prescriptions carry over from his time to ours."

Valls is correct to point out that, in both discussions, I stop short of fleshing out the particulars and then prescribing a course of action for contemporary activists. In the epilogue, I fully acknowledge that my book is not intended to be a "how-to" manual. Instead its purpose is to construct King's theory of political service and to distill the larger lessons that are applicable for our contemporary moment. These larger lessons are what are meant to carry over from King's time to our own, and not the particulars. Throughout the book, I show how, even during King's relatively short tenure in the civil rights movement, the particulars evolved, were context dependent, and were constantly subject to democratic contestation. However, what is constant is King's insistence that individuals have a responsibility to work collectively to transform structures of injustice. And when members of society fail to discharge their responsibility, King claims that they should be subject to a climate of social pressure and scorn. In several chapters, I deliberately discuss how King himself was subject to an intense climate of social pressure within the black community. The particulars of this social pressure—whether via protest, heated conversation, blog posts, or Twitter—will always be in flux, but the duty to discharge one's responsibility shall remain the same.

Like the particulars of social pressure, I did not feel the need to prescribe specific sources of hope to contemporary activists. Again, the larger lesson should not be lost, which is that in a struggle for justice where existential violence is a reality, one needs to be fortified by sources robust enough to push on in the face of (at times) certain death. These sources can be in the form of drawing on the spirit and memory of ancestors, embracing a democratic faith, or practicing a theistic religion or mode of spirituality. That King happened to be a Christian is largely irrelevant to this greater lesson—especially considering that the civil rights movement was a pluralistic one.

In sum, it is my hope that readers will not get bogged down in the particulars and thereby lose sight of the larger lessons embedded within King's theory of political service.