



“Engaging Narrative, Bold Perspectives, Tortured Dogmas”

a 3 star review by Dick Burkhardt of

How To Be an Antiracist

By Ibram Kendi (2019)

This book reads like the compelling narrative “The Autobiography of Malcom X” except punctuated by bursts of pithy but sometimes dubious doctrines of race. That is, Kendi’s aim is to spread his ideology to a wide audience by making it more palatable through vivid stories and confessions from his own life. This book is in the tradition of Critical Race Theory (CRT), especially in its guilt-tripping way of branding most people as “racists”, either for not being sufficiently “antiracist” or for favoring assimilation (tarring most immigrants and educators). Yet, on the plus side, Kendi boldly attacks the anti-white doctrines of other popular CRT ideologies, such as those of Robin DiAngelo and Charles Mills. In brief, Kendi blames continued racism on “failed racial ideologies” (p 201) which advise “going after white people instead of racist power” (p 131), saying that “only policy change helps groups” (p 210).

Unfortunately, Kendi’s dogmatism hit me in the face right up front. He proclaims that “there is no neutrality in the racism struggle” (p 9). That is, you’re either an antiracist or you’re a racist. And later: “The only way to remedy racist discrimination is anti-racist discrimination” (p 19). To me this feels like a fundamentalist preacher proclaiming, “Believe in Jesus or You’re Going to Hell”. Besides this extreme dualism, a basic problem is that according to the simplest definition of racism (“prejudice or discrimination based on race”) a person could easily be a non-racist (or a racist for that matter) without being an activist for or against racism. Also this might differ according to the “race” in question.

Kendi tries to solve this dilemma by redefining “racism” (a common practice in CRT): Belief “in a racial hierarchy” of economic and political power that needs to be maintained. A key problem with this “racial hierarchy” concept is that there are often confounding factors, such as degraded class status that may erase race advantages, as for the white Southern / Appalachian underclass for much of US history.

This is how Kendi shifts from personal racism to the politics and policies of structural racism. But in real life many people could recognize the existence of some kind of racial hierarchy without being an activist for or against it. Others might recognize that the purported hierarchy is only partly about race and that issues of justice, including racial equity, might be better served by approaching them through the lens of economics or class rather than race. That is, identity politics is a high risk business, especially for minorities who might be scapegoated in less prosperous or less equal times.

On another point of craziness, Kendi claims that he uses “racism” only as a descriptive word, that it is only a pejorative term in the minds of white supremacists like Richard Spencer (p 9), when this entire volume repeats constantly the theme “antiracism = good, racism = bad”.

Personally I would suggest an alternative approach, to avoid the resentments and guilt-tripping that often come from labeling, and to generate more positive activism, based on good will of the kind inspired by MLK. Example: Instead of talking about “race”, talk about “diversity”, referring to relevant group characteristics such as ethnic, class, or similar status, sometimes combined with other factors such as language, religion, cultural interests, etc. Thus instead of defeating a presumed “racial hierarchy”, the goal would be a suitable blend of more equal opportunities and outcomes for people of diverse backgrounds. The particular definitions of “opportunity”, “outcome”, and “blend” would depend on the historical socio-economic context of the diversity in question. Note that using this framework, one could study the caste system in India, treatment of indigenous peoples almost everywhere, and many other systems throughout world history which elude the US / European concept of race yet raise many of the same issues of equity.

Escaping the narrow lens of race, activists may realize that often the safest way, sometimes the only politically feasible way, is to design programs that will benefit all those who are downtrodden, knowing that oppressed racial groups will benefit the most. Explicit “Anti-racist” policies, like school busing, may produce backlash and fail to yield racial equity unless carefully thought through, evaluated, and modified as necessary, taking into account the current economics, politics, and other non-racial factors.

Yet another note of absurdity is when Kendi claims that “assimilationist ideas are racist ideas” (p 29). It’s not exactly a secret that the vast majority of immigrants, or would-be immigrants, to the US want to assimilate, or if it’s too hard for them, they certainly want their children to assimilate. Why? Because they are practical – they don’t want their descendants to end up as second or third class citizens. That is, they want equal opportunity, the kind that is almost impossible with the basics of assimilation, such as a good education, expecting that with hard work this will eventually lead to more equal outcomes.

So what’s wrong with Kendi? He has the crazy notion that people would only want to assimilate, or help others assimilate, because they believe the “society of the assimilated” is racially superior and should dominate others, e.g., peopled by white supremacists. To see just how insulting this is, consider that two of my daughters (fully assimilated though bi-ethnic) have taught English as a Second Language (ESL) to very appreciative students. Even my wife and I have taught ESL to some senior Vietnamese ladies who had trouble shopping, riding the bus, etc. Even Kendi

himself pursued his studies all the way to a Ph.D., an esteemed goal of assimilation. To use his language, I'd conclude that it would *be racist not to support the basics of assimilation*. Of course, our society can accommodate a wide variety of cultural tastes and differences, especially in large urban areas, so this is not what assimilation is about. It's fundamentally about education, citizenship, and understanding cultural norms.

One of our great advocates for assimilation is the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr: "The Disuniting of American: Reflections on a Multicultural Society". Why? He observes that "tribal antagonisms have caused more dominating, fearing, hating, killing than any other single cause since time began". "It is ironic that what the multiculturalists began as a celebration of diversity ends as a grim crusade for conformity". By assimilating, the US minorities have transformed that larger society, none more so than the African Americans. "A telling indicator is the rising rate of intermarriage across ethnic, religious, even racial lines", continuously creating a "unique American identity". In fact, issues of "race" will decline naturally over time unless CRT elites actively obstruct assimilation.

I wish that Kendi would pay more attention to his own confessions: "Intensely gullible, I was liable to believe anything, a believer more than a thinker. Racist ideas love believers, not thinkers" (p 122). Pretty accurate in explaining his dogmatism and irrational notions assimilation. Except he finally did realize that black people had power and could be racist too (p 140). But in his chapter on Failure he relapses into narrow mindedness, blaming "failed racial ideologies" (p 201) instead of studying history from multiple viewpoints, not just race. He even attacks abolitionists and reconstructionists for not meeting his exacting standards for contemporary antiracism.

Kendi's notion of capitalism and racism being joined at the hip is equally absurd. Just look at China, which functions as a different version of a capitalist society. He shows no understanding of the importance of allies among the ruling elites – think FDR. I also discovered that personally at world social forums where I organized programs on global democracy, and third world activists told me how much it meant to them to have allies from the "belly of the beast" (= the US empire). Likewise Kendi shows no understanding of the levels of activism: (1) activities that help individuals (soup kitchens, etc) (2) witness / protests (3) policy development, lobbying, politicking, etc. For example, "only policy change helps groups" (p 210) is a useful reminder (level 3) but ignores that helping individuals and protests (levels 1 &2) can be a foundation for policy change:

Kendi is certainly on track when he says "To fight for mental and moral change as a *prerequisite* for policy change" ...makes "it almost impossible for antiracist power to succeed" (p 208). Yet he fails to identify CRT as a prime example of such failure. The focus on "transforming open-minded people" (p 212) and self-critique when this fails (p 214) is also on the right track, instead of blaming "their hate rather than our impatient and alienating hate of them" (p 213). He continues his winning streak with "Blame policy, not people, for societal problems" (p 218). : "My research kept pointing me to the same answer: The source of racist ideas was not ignorance and hate but self-interest." (p230). Yet even this comes up short, because he does not bring up the overall political economy, neo-liberal capitalism itself, and the existential challenges we face from limits-to-growth and ecological catastrophes.

