
Time to Get Over Racial Worldviews

Review of "The Arc of a Bad Idea" by Carlos Hoyt

DICK BURKHART

MAY 23



SHARE

"The Arc of a Bad Idea - Understanding and Transcending Race" By Carlos Hoyt (2016)

Hoyt is a *nominally black* scholar and writer who rejects "racial identity" – it's a highly variable and ambiguous "social construct" after all. And it perpetuates the very worldview it seeks to demolish. As Hoyt puts it, "It is as if instead of refusing to be shackled to a lie, we ingest it, and then try mightily to somehow metabolize stigma into virtue. Why not refuse the poison in the first place?" (p 145).

Hoyt is fully aware of how the "virtue" of black pride has been a powerful lure to so many in his situation, even to himself when younger. But history and logic tell him that it's a dead end. He quotes many scholars of "black studies" who've wrestled with this dilemma, most still striving to justify identity politics, oblivious to the reality that all attempt to *square the circle* are doomed to failure.

Note that the contradiction at the root of racial identity has finally escalated into a full blown crisis - manifested by the growing backlash, from across the political spectrum, against an identity politics that has gone overboard into cancel culture - into injustice sold as justice.

Hoyt is writing primarily for a literate black audience, based on his academic research. As someone who comes from a *nominally white* nonracial worldview, trying to understand the current obsession with race, I find his book refreshingly honest and to-

the-point. Especially since he doesn't get sucked into the toxic abstractions of post modernism and critical theory.

Hoyt poses the question, "is a *nominally black* person in the USA an American or a black?" This leads to "the notion of two warring souls and two warring ideals and is predicated on the acceptance of the spurious premise of a second racial soul and identity" (p 5). It's a "cultural meme" that could be erased more easily than most people suspect: In one sociological experiment sharp decreases in racial encoding "occurred in response to only 4 minutes of exposure to an alternative world where race did not predict coalitional alliance" (p 8). In addition, "many young adults of mixed backgrounds are rejecting the color lines that have defined Americans for generations in favor of a much more fluid sense of identity" (p 16). Hoyt himself came from a home where Costa Rican culture prevailed but grew up being treated as a black American male.

Hoyt spends much of a chapter analyzing the shortcomings of "racial identity theory", which classifies several stages in the development of racial identity. He points out that "no where in Cross's theory or model, or in racial identity theory in general, is there room for a person who...although identified/constructed as black by others...disavows racial identity" (p 22). And, "by treating race as it were a permanent problem...we make it so" (p 37). In fact, "there is something Frankensteinian in recognizing one's agency and responsibility in creating something harmful and then adopting a stance of impotence regarding bringing about its destruction" (p 36).

Digging deeper, Hoyt analyzes "racialization" into 5 steps:

- (1) *Selecting* characteristics as signs of racial difference;
- (2) *Sorting* people based on these characteristics;
- (3) *Attributing* certain personality traits and behaviors to these characteristics;
- (4) *Essentializing* purported racial differences as natural and immutable;
- (5) *Acting* as if purported racial differences justify unequal treatment.

Then “race transcendence” becomes the refusal to participate in this process of racialization (p 39).

And the big question is, “What keeps this racialization going?” Hoyt recognizes “in-group / out-group distinctions” as a primordial way of inter-group competition. And slavery has always been driven by economics, with cheap labor taking its place over the last century or two. But now we have theories of “neo-liberal” economics rather than race to justify global hegemony. So you might think that racialization would be dying away of its own accord.

Here's where Hoyt comes up short, since he has focused more on the sociology than on the economics. Since 1980 the world has experienced a long period of escalating economic inequality within nations, especially in the US (though with declining inequality between many nations). In the US the failure of either major political party to do much about this has finally led to a rise of scapegoating, with race once again situated to rear its ugly head.

Except that today's racialization is much different, with the *Acting* becoming a blame and shame game targeting “whiteness”. This doctrine of *whiteness* is a recently created set of purported characteristics, traits, and behaviors, such as Tema Okun's 15 traits of “white supremacy culture”. These traits have nothing to do with actual white supremacy, of course, but they do describe some recognizable features of modern middle class and corporate culture. Thus *whiteness* has become a stand-in for the dislocations caused by neoliberal globalization, sponsored, not surprisingly, by global capitalism itself to divert attention from its neoliberal agenda.

That is, whereas colonial racism and white supremacy was developed to justify chattel slavery and colonial exploitation, today's far more educated audience has been targeted by the racialization of *whiteness* to take the blame for the dislocations of neoliberal globalization.