

The Better of the Two Big Antiracism Bestsellers

Kendi's analysis lacks subtlety but beats White Fragility

How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi

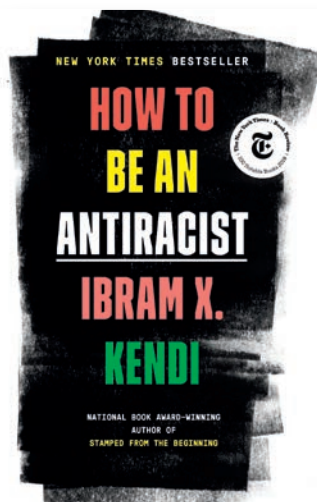
One World, 2019, \$27; 320 pages.

As reviewed by John McWhorter

IBRAM X. KENDI'S *How to Be an Antiracist* is a very simple book.

In a way, this is a relief, given its contrast with the other go-to book of the moment for whites seeking a way to help America heal racially in the wake of the murder by policemen of George Floyd in Minneapolis this past spring. Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* presents an indoctrination program seeking to make whites aware of inner racism they didn't know they had, broadening their self-image into one of passive but unpardonable complicity within a fundamentally racist system. *White Fragility*, short, smileless, and leaving one straining to process its requirements and how they relate to our humanity, is Kantian in its way—a spare, pitiless challenge in prose, proposing that a certain amount of mental labor will yield life-changing insight (although *White Fragility* in fact does not).

Kendi, in this vein, is reminiscent of the lesser moments of the Scottish enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), whom Kendi actually name-checks, but only to note his racism. Any Hume is worthy, of course, and besides the fact that Kendi's purview is somewhat broader than DiAngelo's, he shares with Hume what we might call a certain pellucid quality: it is rarely difficult to glean what he is getting at. Unfortunately, he also shares with Hume a bent for assessments somewhat facile and subjective. Hume's notions of what makes us "cheerful" and why were not always logically watertight; Kendi's on what racism is and what we should do about it are often similarly contestable, as we put it these days.



Not that it has diminished the book's popularity. At this writing, *How to Be an Antiracist* has spent 21 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Publishers Weekly* reported in late June 2020 that the book, published in August 2019, had sold 218,214 print copies this year, according to BookScan, which captures most but not all sales. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in early June 2020 that there are more than half a million copies of the book in print. Kendi's book is featured on a Smithsonian Institution website for educators; cited by education-sector professional organizations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; and suggested as summer reading by institutions including the University of California, Berkeley and Cornell University, which promised in June to "provide all students, faculty, and staff with information about how to access an electronic copy of the book, along with a schedule of virtual discussions which will take place over the summer." The National Park Service is even offering material aimed at helping teachers of 9th-grade through 12th-grade students to facilitate *How to Be an Antiracist* book clubs.

A Spartan Classification

The book addresses assorted standard-issue topics on race in succession such as crime and education, in short-ish chapters framed in episodes from Kendi's biography. Kendi began with an affection of Bill Cosby-style scolding of Black people as a teen but feels that he found his true and useful self in his current battle against "white supremacy," and a looming implication in his book is that the rest of America can complete themselves in internalizing his antiracist positions. Kendi, like Hume, would seem to have it all figured out: We are divided simply between racists and antiracists. Racists are bigots and allow a status quo under which Black people are not doing as well as whites. Antiracists are committed to working against that imbalance. For reasons Kendi seems to think are obvious but are not, there is nothing in between these two categories—not to be actively working, or at least speaking, against the imbalance leaves one in the racist class. There is no such thing as someone who is simply "not racist."

It is easy to suppose that this Spartan classification is fashioned as a way to afford people of Kendi's orientation a handy way to tar as many people as possible as racists. However, as the book progresses it becomes clear that Kendi is simply not much for careful argumentation. For example, he counsels that Black people should not actively despise whites, a position one would not expect from him, and thus leading one to anticipate an interesting discussion. But Kendi instead leaves as many questions as answers:

When Black people recoil from White racism and concentrate their hatred on everyday White

people, as I did freshman year in college, they are not fighting racist power or racist policymakers. In losing focus on racist power, they fail to challenge anti-Black racist policies, which means those policies are likely to flourish. Going after White people instead of racist power prolongs the policies harming Black life.

But can't hating whites lead a person to fight racial inequities? Upon what basis is Kendi assuming it doesn't or even usually doesn't? We aren't told why. Rather, this paragraph has the resounding conclusion that "In the end, hating White people becomes hating Black people."

Cue the applause, but only on the pain of sacrificing ratiocination for sonic punch. Kendi is concerned as much with personal testimony—as in his observation above about his freshman year—as explanation. The book is a Bildungsroman of sorts, in which Kendi goes from making a speech about Black responsibility as a teenager to his current position as one of the deans of the Black left. This is cherished as authenticity by fans, but many of them tend to dismiss autobiographical recollections from Black writers right of middle-left as distracting "anecdote." Those beyond the already converted will feel this way often while reading *How to Be an Antiracist*—the testimony makes for an easy read, but at the cost of substance.

Culture Matters Too

This is especially dire in a foundational assumption that Kendi lays out explicitly: that all racial disparities are due to racism. That so very many have pushed back against this way of viewing a complex society with a four-century history figures for Kendi as mere "racists" having their say. There is a general air in his text suggesting that the basic

wisdom of "unequal outcomes signal unequal opportunity" is beyond question by any moral person, such that we might think it a courtesy that he makes his case without raising his voice.

But in the end, as much as thinkers like him bristle to hear it, culture matters as well as society in how groups fare over time, and the history of Black Americans does not somehow exempt us from this basic aspect of humanity. That is, cultural factors can live beyond what conditioned them, as in Albanian blood feuds. Ordinary people tend to understand this spontaneously, and

on Black America it has been clear to legions of people—many of them Black, although to Kendi this makes them "racists"—since a generation past the Great Society efforts of the 1960s. Kendi instead operates upon the idea that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates has memorably put it, "There's nothing wrong with black people that the complete and total elimination of white supremacy would not fix." Cue the applause again, but reality suggests otherwise.

In 1987, a rich donor in Philadelphia "adopted" 112 Black 6th graders, few of whom had grown up with fathers in their home. He guaranteed them a fully funded education through college as long as they did not do drugs, have children before getting married, or commit crimes. He also gave them tutors, workshops, and after-school programs, kept them busy in summer programs, and provided them with counselors for when they had any kind of problem. Yes, this really happened.

The result? Forty-five never made it through high school. Of the 67 boys, 19 became felons. Twelve years later, the 45 girls had had 63 children, and more than half had become mothers before the age of 18. Part of what makes *How to Be an Antiracist* a simple book is its neglect of cases like this, or the assumption that they easily trace to "racism." What held those poor kids back was that they had been raised amidst a different sense of what is normal than white kids in the 'burbs. That is, yes, another way of saying "culture," and it means that through no fault of their own, it was not resources, but those unconsciously internalized norms, that kept them from being able to take advantage of what they were being offered.

Kendi's taxonomy would classify what I just wrote as



Ibram X. Kendi

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“racist,” but to qualify as coherent, this charge would have to come with a more careful defense than Kendi seems accustomed to engaging. For example, if that Philly story is a generation past the Great Society is just a fluke, what about what was happening in Kansas City around the same time? Twelve new schools were built to replace crummy ones Black students had been mired in for decades. The effort cost 1.4 billion dollars. The new schools included broadcast studios, planetariums, big swimming pools, and fencing lessons. Per-pupil spending was doubled, while class size was halved to about 25 students a class. Elementary school students all got their own computers, and there were now 53 counselors for them when before there had been none.

Fade out, fade in: dropout rates doubled, the achievement gap between white and Black students sat frozen, and the schools ended up needing security guards to combat theft and violence. The reason for this was nothing pathological about the kids: the story of how Black inner cities got to the state they were in by the 1980s is complex and has nothing to do with blame. However, to say that the revolution in schooling offered to these kids was not a major antiracist effort, in Kendi’s terms, would be willfully resistant to empiricism.

To wit: antiracism, under Kendi’s

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definition, only explains so much. Racism quite often leaves cultural legacies that render Black people unable to take advantage of antiracist policies. Concerned people devote careers trying to figure out what to do about this, and they should. But consulting Kendi, they will encounter a proton/neutron contrast between “racist” and “antiracist” that blinds them to the nature of problems in the real world.

His philosophy founders especially on education in this way. Kendi

subscribes to the notion getting around these days, from the contingent fascinated with white privilege, that things like close reasoning, the written word, and objectivity are “white” practices, the imposition upon Black people of which is “racist.” Hence another passage that many readers will find stirring, but that others will find disturbing and even, in Kendi’s terms, “racist”:

What if different environments lead to different kinds of achievement rather than different levels of achievement? What if the intellect of a low-testing Black child in a poor Black school is different from—and not inferior to—the intellect of a high-testing White child in a rich White school? What if we measured intelligence by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environments? What if we measured intellect by an individual’s desire to know?

But what does this mean, as counsel from Kendi, who is the head of Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research? Just how would we measure “desire to know”? What student would deny “wanting to know”? And just what would “wanting to know” yield in terms of skills or reasoning power?

More to the point, if it’s “racist” that there are so few Black professors pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and math—a common opinion it is reasonable to assume Kendi espouses—then how does suggesting we assess Black people’s intelligence via their street smarts, capacity for emotional empathy, and “spunk”—which is essentially what Kendi and others mean with suggestions like these—help solve that problem? None of those traits will be of much use in laboratory

work or higher mathematics. George Washington Carver’s miracles with the peanut were not driven by some kind of “authentic” alternate science—he worked within the conventional scientific method he learned at Iowa State. The snazzy-looking little View-Master of our memories was designed by a Black man, Charles Harrison. He used the same skills as white designers of his time; savory Black spontaneity and in-touch-ness would have done nothing to help him.

The Real Work

Kendi’s is, in the end, a simple book. One senses little interest in engaging questions. The text works in basic colors, not shades; splashes, not brushstrokes—perhaps because he thinks the roots of all Black problems in white perfidy are too clear to require complexity. Still, his directness, pragmatism, and societal focus are certainly preferable to *White Fragility*’s psychological torture sessions in the guise of sociopolitical commitment. For example, Kendi at least allows that whites can be antiracist, as opposed to DiAngelo’s focus on the idea that to be white is to be a bigot deep down until you are dead under God’s brown dirt.

In the end, Kendi’s back-of-the-envelope dichotomies and rhetorical maxims will inspire no outside-the-box thought. However, this fundamentally unchallenging essence will itself bolster and preserve the book’s popularity for at least another decade, and thus it is worth finding the value in it that we can. In truth, if *How to Be an Antiracist* increases the number of Americans committed to activism that makes life better for Black people who need help, its substance becomes a background matter. Out doing the real work, people will, as have generations of concerned people before them, immediately encounter and seek their way through the complexities that Kendi cannot perceive.

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