

**Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America**, Ibram X. Kendi, Bold Type Books, 2017, pp. 608, \$11.34 softcover.

## Intellectual Affirmative Action

Alexander Riley

We have been here before, though not quite. At the tail end of the 1960s, the radical Black Power movement produced an array of pseudo-intellectuals who held forth to those who would listen, presenting ignorantly counterfactual accounts of American history, culture, and politics. This group included the multiple-murderer who led the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, whose written wisdom included a book titled *Revolutionary Suicide* that was cited by Jim Jones as the more than 900 followers of his cult drank the poison that killed them; the Stalinist totalitarian philosopher Angela Davis, who in addition to crafting turgid communist tracts materially aided the terrorists who

assassinated a federal judge during an attempted prison break in a California courtroom; and the career criminal and murderer George Jackson, whose several book-length paeans to thug-gish violence and mayhem may well have been ghost-written by the same team of radical attorneys who smuggled him the gun he used to kill several prison guards before he was himself shot dead while attempting escape. These self-professed revolutionary thinkers flew at a literary and intellectual level just a few inches above the ground, though the current politicized nature of much of academic life has enabled them fifty years later to find their way on to college syllabi and into other campus programming, including Martin Luther King Day/Week celebrations.

The essential point is that, in their time, these criminal subversives were read only by other self-professed revolutionaries and radicals, and no one in any position of real cultural, political, or economic power attended to their rantings. Their blathering about the purportedly fundamental corruption of American culture and society was rightly relegated to a fringe position on the spectrum of American

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political discourse, ignored by all serious members of the educated public.

Today, we have a new crop of self-righteously mendacious, intellectually empty, and politically destructive black writers who produce the same genre of tendentious essays and books based in unargued assertion and a total disregard for facts and reality. Their thought is of the same base quality as that of the 1960s radicals, but unlike Newton, Davis, and Jackson, this new generation of black radical writers are awarded book prizes and huge gifts for their academic centers by the people and institutions that direct American society. Their writings are also given to students, not merely in college but at the earliest entry into the educational institutions, the better to insinuate themselves into the consciousness of American youth.

Ibram X. Kendi, a professor at Boston University and director of its Center for Antiracist Research, who will doubtless soon be offered a position at one or another of America's most elite universities, has emerged as the lead prophet in this collection of subversive writers. Much has been published already in criticism of the shoddiness of *How To Be An Antiracist* (2019), the book no woke academic or student can be without in the George Floyd era. But the book

that first put him on the map of the woke black intelligentsia, which is acclaimed widely on the left as an exemplary work of political scholarship, was *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Because the events that pushed Kendi and others into the elevated cultural position they currently occupy had not yet taken place on its publication, it has received rather less attention than *How To Be An Antiracist*. But a fair, honest effort to evaluate the quality of his thought ought to start with this work that his fans claim as his most substantive and weighty offering to date.

The first clue to what one is dealing with here is in the book's subtitle. "Definitive" means "being the most accurate and thorough," and its synonyms include "authoritative," "classic," and "magisterial." What serious writer would dare to describe his own work in such a blusteringly pompous way? Proper intellectuals know that such judgments are to be made by intellectual communities, not by the authors of their own works. Yes, it's true that publishers sometimes provide titles that authors mightn't prefer, but this is not a trivial matter. If Kendi were a serious intellectual, he would have anticipated this justified reaction and he would have required his publisher to omit that term. That

he did not, I submit, tells us something useful.

What then of its substance? On its very first page, in the prologue, the reader finds this statement: “If Black people make up 13.2 percent of the U.S. population, then Black people should make up somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans killed by police, somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans sitting in prisons, somewhere close to owning 13 percent of U.S. wealth.” A freshman student in any of my classes who wrote such a thing in a paper would immediately attract my attention as someone in need of remedial instruction, as this shows ignorance of basic reasoning skills required for success in college. Imagine a writer who claimed: “If White people make up 70 percent of the US population, then White people should make up somewhere close to 70 percent of the Americans who play professional football and basketball . . .” Kendi has committed the same egregious fallacy. This kind of claim would be true only if members of racial groups were entirely indistinguishable in their behavior, their aptitudes, and their interests. But no one with any experience of different racial groups could possibly believe that to be so, and empirical sociological data support that experiential knowledge. The fact that these groups

differ in many ways along these lines explains why you see them disproportionately represented in various realms of social life.

Kendi is correct that Blacks are among those killed by police at a higher percentage than their representation in the population. But here’s another fact which is helpful in untangling the most likely explanation, a fact Kendi never troubles himself to mention: Blacks are also quite significantly overrepresented among the ranks of those who kill police officers. According to FBI data from 2010 to 2018, they were responsible for 39 percent of the total officers killed in the line of duty. Now, given that context, which is more likely: that blacks are killed at disproportionate rates because of the systematic racism of police, for which we have almost no evidence, or that this happens because blacks are also disproportionately predisposed in interactions with police to respond with potentially lethal violence?

*Stamped from the Beginning* is little more than a long series of such assertions, with little evidentially-based argumentation to support them. Historical vignettes are strung about throughout its length as ornaments, and a case for general principles about American culture is made from them alone. There is no philosophical or

social scientific depth to the book at all. Kendi fawns over risibly idealized and easily falsified versions of various subversives in the history of black radicalism. Malcolm X is a great humanist who never expressed any hatred for others, while Angela Davis is a righteous sister who could not possibly have supported totalitarian Stalinism and actively worked alongside murderous terrorists like the Jackson brothers, George and Jonathan. All insinuations that some black cultural practices (single parenthood, for example, or anti-schooling attitudes) are a net negative for black advance are, here as in Kendi's other writings, dismissed as racist, as are any arguments that assert that, as a racial minority, blacks must assimilate to at least some basics of the majority culture—educational attainment, work ethic, commitment to marriage and attentive parenting—if they hope to advance. The reader finds here the same morally abhorrent 1960s language of the black prison abolition movement, referring to convicted black murderers as “slaves” victimized by a system of “slavery.”

The efforts to make sense of aspects of mainstream American culture are equally distorted by Kendi's rigid ideological lens. The omnipresent Bo Derek image running on the beach in the 1980s film

*10* was a racist phenomenon because she appropriated the black cultural practice of hair braids. The *Rocky* film franchise is racist since Rocky, a white boxer, defeats black boxers, some of whom are modeled too closely on historically existing heavyweights such as Muhammad Ali or Sonny Liston. Entire scholarly disciplines of academic research—evolutionary psychology, physical anthropology, and sociobiology—are ignorantly dismissed as “segregationist fields” because they do not ascribe to the anti-scientific view Kendi promotes in which racial difference can never be spoken of as having potentially anything at all to do with demonstrated genetic differences in different human regional populations.

The citation method utilized in the book is sloppy at an undergraduate student level. Frequently, no notes are given for substantive claims. When they are, they arrive in clusters at the end of paragraphs, often making it next to impossible to verify sources of information. This cluster method, it turns out, is a good way to hide omissions. The number of unsubstantiated claims is enough that one could write an entire book documenting them.

Let's look for illustrative purposes in detail at one example. Kendi claims that white violent crime rates are higher than those of blacks because

violent crime as a category does not include the carnage produced by drunk drivers. Leave aside the legal and moral question of the proper category for the deaths that result from drunk driving and those that are a result of murders, that is, the fact that drunk drivers are in almost all cases not intending to harm or kill anyone but do so out of a species of criminal negligence that all courts recognize as serious but separable from the willful act of intentionally taking another's life. The real problem with Kendi's claim is not legal philosophical but statistical. He insinuates that all drunk drivers who kill people are white but gives no figures on the demographics of drunken driving or injury and death resulting from it. He provides one claim of a statistical nature here, asserting that 78 percent of arrested drunk drivers in one year (1990) were white. (None of the sources in the collective footnote at the end of the paragraph in which this claim appears contain this statistic). But whites were 80 percent of the American population in 1990, so if Kendi's figure is right, it would show that whites are in fact slightly under-represented among arrested drunk drivers. Data from the National Traffic Highway Safety Administration show that, based on vehicle miles traveled,

blacks have a higher crash involvement than white drivers.

So Kendi's astounding claim is the following: *some significant number of people are killed by drunk drivers; in one specific year, whites made up a particular percentage of the population of arrested drunk drivers; thus, whites must pose a more significant threat to harm and death for the general population than blacks.* But, again, he has given only a figure on arrests for drunk driving. We do not know how many people were injured or killed by those arrested individuals. We do know that the vast majority of drunk drivers, including those arrested for the fact, did not even have automobile accidents, much less kill anyone; they are arrested for driving erratically, or at routine stops where breathalyzer tests are administered to all drivers. We simply do not know what the racial demography of drunk drivers who kill or harm others looks like, though some data suggest that blacks are higher crash risks than whites, and Kendi gives no indication that he has even considered this question, which he would have to answer to hope to back up the claim he makes.

The need to substantiate one's claims does not occur to Kendi as a reasonable obligation because his goal in this book and in his other writing is not scientific illustration of how

social reality operates. His purpose is propagandistic. In this, again, he fits neatly into a tradition of black radical writers stemming back to the 1960s. The poor writing and research quality of the current BLM intellectuals is related to a broader decline in the standards promulgated by the humanities and social science disciplines, as they relate to racial matters. Ultimately, one cannot blame Kendi and others like him for utilizing the tried and true model of gaining prominence through charges of racism without evidence. It is the largely white cultural elites who fund him, who assign his books in their classes, and cheerlead for him from their sites of institutional power; these are the true culprits to whom blame should be assigned. Their affirmative action commitment, reflected most illustratively in their almost universal support for the classics scholar Daniel Padilla Peralta who insisted “I should have been hired because I was black” and “[m]y merit and my blackness are fused to each other,”<sup>1</sup> has resulted in a fundamentally racist effort to promote substantively vacuous black radical thinking based on the narrative it represents rather than the intellectual quality of that work. This fecklessness should be disdained and

rejected by all who care about real intellectual standards.

The support given to Kendi by these people has led him, among other things, to repackage *Stamped from the Beginning* for an audience still less literate and critical than the one for whom he wrote the original. In collaboration with a “youth” writer, we now have *Stamped*, a still more dumbed down version of an already very dumb book. Here is a representative bit of prose from this latest effort:

This isn't a history book . . .  
 This is a present book . . .  
 Segregationists are haters. Like, real haters. People who hate you for not being like them. Assimilationists are people who like you, but only with quotation marks. Like, “like you.” . . . So where do we start? We might as well just jump in and begin with the world's first racist . . . you're thinking Yeah, tell us, so we can find out where he lives. Well, he's dead. Been dead for six hundred years. Thankfully. And before I tell you about him, I have to give you a little context. Europe [was] conquering everyone . . . The year is 1415, and Prince Henry . . . of Portugal . . . pull[ed]

<sup>1</sup> John Rosenberg, “Is Being Black a Badge of Merit?,” *Minding the Campus*, January 9, 2019.

a caper and capture[d] the main Muslim trading depot on the northeastern tip of Morocco . . . Stolen. A jack move. A robbery. Plain and simple. The take, a bountiful supply of gold. And Africans.

Nowhere in the midst of this unsophisticated rendering do we find acknowledgement of the fact that Muslims in that part of the world had been operating a lucrative trade in African slaves for centuries before the Europeans showed up. We do learn a bit later along, though, that Puritan ideas about witches are the beginning of stereotypes of blacks as criminals: “Since the devil represented criminality, and since criminals in New England were said to be the devil’s minions, the Salem witch hunt made the Black face the face of criminality. It was like racist algebra. Solve for x. Solve for White. Solve for anything other than truth.”

I found myself, as I was leafing through *Stamped*, wondering if I were being put on, if this was some kind of not very funny prank or parody. Lamentably, no. This is what politically-motivated affirmative action in the intellectual world has wrought. Ibram Kendi has replaced Huey Newton, with the difference that now every educational institution and many

places of employment are requiring you to read him. Newton could safely be ignored by the sane; Kendi cannot. We have our work cut out for us to resist this wave of intellectual cretinization provoked by the American cultural elite’s soft bigotry of low expectations.