

The Move from “Not Being Racist” to Being an Antiracist

Ibram Kendi defines a racist as, “one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.” In contrast, an antiracist, is, “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.” Antiracism is more important now than ever. The myth of a post-racial United States following the election of a Black president is debilitating. It creates an illusion that racism has been eliminated when it is in fact alive and well. The term “not racist” has little meaning and is passive in nature. Being antiracist, on the other hand, is an active statement that commits to the active destruction of racism.

Kendi compares racism to cancer (he is a survivor of stage 4 colon cancer). He imagines racism as a cancerous tumor that has grown rapidly and is fatal if unchecked. However, there is hope. Racism is a relatively modern epidemic compared to the history of humanity: it has only been going on for 600 years, so, in a sense, we caught this cancer early. Once identified it must be treated with multiple rounds of “chemotherapy”. It will, however, not be easy- most of us have internalized racism and ridding our bodies and minds of it is not a one-time purge. Just like cancer, racism is capable of creeping back in, so individuals must be intentional about putting antiracist policies in place.

Being called a racist has become a slur in contemporary America and many Americans feel that being called a racist is one of the most offensive insults. However, no one is born intrinsically racist. Racism is fluid: you can be racist at some points in time and antiracist in others. Kendi points this out in America’s first Black president, Barack Obama. Specifically, he highlights Obama’s criticism of Black fathers, who he claimed were not doing enough, in the Father’s Day speech he delivered during his run for president in 2008. There exists a myth that people of color are immune to racism, which is false because, people of color can internalize racism and reproduce it in their own particular ways. People of color sometimes struggle to realize that the only crime they have committed is thinking they are somehow part of an inferior race.

The Boston University Antiracist Research Center which was founded by Kendi is an example of an innovative approach to doing antiracist work. The Center fosters, “exhaustive racial research, research-based policy innovation, data-driven educational and advocacy campaigns, and narrative-change initiatives.”

Individuals play an important role in pushing an antiracist agenda in all aspects of life. Policies do not make themselves. Thus, identifying racist policy and policymakers and finding ways to reform them can create real antiracist change. Kendi states that, “...if we ignore the odds and fight to create an antiracist world, then we give humanity a chance to one day survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free.”

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Information gathered from “Our Mission,” Center for Antiracist Research (<https://www.bu.edu/antiracism-center/>); Sayyid S’ “Post-Racial Paradoxes: Rethinking European Racism and Anti-Racism” in *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 2017, no. 1, Feb, 2017; Ibram X Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* (One World, 2019); Ibram X Kendi’s “This is What an Antiracist America Would Look Like. How Do We Get There?” in *The Guardian*, Dec. 6, 2018; Ibram X Kendi’s “Ibram X. Kendi on Trump, Obama & Why ‘Internalized Racism Is the Real Black-on-Black Crime’” in *Democracy Now!* Aug. 13, 2019; and David Theo Goldberg’s “Racism” in *Encyclopedia of American Studies* (John Hopkins University Press, 2018).