The racism of good intentions

Review of "Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America" by Ibram X. Kendi and "Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation" by Nicholas Guyatt

By Carlos Lozada April 15, 2016

Illustration by Ellen Weinstein for The Washington Post
Here are some people you may not usually think of as racists: Abraham Lincoln. Frederick Douglass. Susan B. Anthony. W.E.B. Du Bois. Harriet Beecher Stowe. Barack Obama. Theirs is not the racism of hate, of biological determinism, of segregation. It is, in Ibram X. Kendi’s telling, the unending and unwitting racism of the well-meaning.

“So many prominent Americans, many of whom we celebrate for their progressive ideas and activism, many of whom had very good intentions, subscribed to assimilationist thinking that has also served up racist beliefs about Black inferiority,” Kendi writes. They did so by promoting freedom but forgetting equality; by placing the burden of combating racism on black shoulders, not white ones; by implicitly accepting notions of inferiority, no matter how righteous their indignation; by conflating anti-racist claims and racist fears in an effort to claim a moralizing middle ground.

In “Stamped From the Beginning,” Kendi’s engrossing and relentless intellectual history of prejudice in America, almost everyone is some kind of racist, whether wielding a whip or unfurling a protest banner. And in Nicholas Guyatt’s “Bind Us Apart,” the most insidious assertion of American racism — “separate but equal” — was more than a post-Reconstruction affirmation of Jim Crow laws, it was a founding principle of the republic, one that still reverberates.

It’s a good moment for books that take a long view on race. After a brief descent into a post-racial fantasy, 21st-century America has realized that it remains quite racial after all. We debate mass incarceration of black citizens, immigration of Latinos and threats to voting rights. We allege cultural appropriation and unconscious privilege. We track matters from police shootings to the diversity of characters in children’s books. And in these battles, accusations of racism are as strident as they are indiscriminate (consider the journalistic euphemism “racially charged,” which on deadline covers just about anything).

Kendi, a historian at the University of Florida, proposes a standard. “My definition of a racist idea is a simple one: it is any concept that regards one racial group as inferior or superior to another racial group in any way.”

This definition is the basis for Kendi’s hunt for racist ideas, stretching back to the 15th century, when scholarly tracts in Europe defended the slave trade by suggesting that African captives required the salvation that only chains would provide. Rationales for black oppression multiplied in the colonial era and the early slave-holding republic — Africans were cursed, biologically and unalterably, rendering them natural slaves; or they were victims of hot climates and could someday be elevated to white, more in soul than body. After the Civil War, when racist practices emerged to ensure that Reconstruction-era
freedoms would not produce anything approaching equality, “lawmakers justified these new racist policies with racist ideas,” Kendi writes. “They proclaimed that the Black codes — which forced Blacks into labor contracts, barred their movement, and regulated their family lives — were meant to restrain them because they were naturally lazy, lawless, and oversexed.”

Note that racial discrimination precedes its intellectual rationale. It is comforting, in a way, to believe that ignorance and hatred produce racist ideas and, in turn, racist actions; if so, greater education and understanding could break the cycle. But this progression is “largely ahistorical,” Kendi writes. Discriminatory actions, wrought by self-interest, come first. Then racist ideas are developed to justify them, and they spread. Hate and ignorance are symptoms, he argues, not causes. By the late 20th century, prejudice was less overt — “law and order” or “war on drugs” or “tough on crime” became the preferred organizing principles — but the arc of history bent in the same direction.

The battles over race in America would be fierce but simple if they pitted only racists against anti-racists, segregation against freedom. However, Kendi also calls out the assimilationists — those who seek to combat racial disparity but find blame in both the oppressed and the oppressors and, in the
author’s view, are complicit in racism’s endurance and evolution.

Some of the most notable racial-justice proponents, both black and white, fall under Kendi’s assault. Consider William Lloyd Garrison, the 19th-century editor of the abolitionist newspaper the Liberator and a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Enslavement had “degraded” black people, Garrison wrote. “Nothing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind.” Though Garrison blamed slavery — not biology — for the plight of African Americans, he still accepted even temporary racial inferiority, to be remedied with education or other kindly forms of social uplift. Indeed, he would argue that suffrage and political equality would be possible only after black “industrial and educational development.”

Garrison and other assimilationists “refused to define their own assimilationist ideas of Black behavioral inferiority as racist,” Kendi notes. “These assimilationists defined only segregationist ideas of Black biological inferiority as racist.” But by Kendi’s definition, both are racist visions.

Abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass is another example. His 1845 book, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,” confronted America with black aspirations for freedom, but at other times Douglass ranged from “his antiracist best to his racist worst,” Kendi asserts. In an 1854 speech, he cited the works of physician James McCune Smith, who embraced climate theory and cultural racism. “Need we go behind the vicissitudes of barbarism for an explanation of the gaunt, wry, apelike appearance of some of the genuine Negroes?” Douglass asked. Kendi also assails the “racist abolitionism” of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” presents African Americans as naturally docile yet spiritually gifted, vehicles for the Christian salvation of white America.

Even Lincoln, during one of his debates with Stephen Douglas, argued that “there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality,” adding that he favored “having the superior position assigned to the white race.” Though the Great Emancipator would become the first president to express support for limited black suffrage, he also promoted colonization, urging freed black Americans to start fresh in Liberia, the new West African nation America had forged. It would be “extremely selfish” of them if they did not, Lincoln lectured.

Perhaps no concept comes in for greater grief in “Stamped From the Beginning” than what Kendi calls “uplift suasion” — the notion that white people could be persuaded away from racist views if they only saw black people working to lift themselves up from their lowly station. In other words, Kendi explains, the task of ending white racism falls to black people. W.E.B. Du Bois, whose career as a pathbreaking scholar and civil rights activist Kendi traces in sympathetic detail, succumbs to this perspective when extolling the “Talented Tenth,” the 10 percent highest-achieving black Americans.
“The first and greatest step toward the settlement of the present friction between the races,” Du Bois said at the opening meeting of the American Negro Academy in 1897, “lies in the correction of the immorality, crime, and laziness among the Negroes themselves, which still remains a heritage of slavery.” Years later, he urged black Americans who had “reached the full measure of the best type European culture” to lead the masses and demonstrate “the capability of Negro blood.”

The problem with uplift suasion, Kendi writes, is that while negative portrayals of black Americans reinforce racist views, positive ones don’t weaken them — they are simply dismissed as exceptions, as “Extraordinary Negroes.” (“The Cosby Show” was a classic case, Kendi contends, with its attempt to “redeem the Black family in the eyes of White America.”) And though he charts Du Bois’s evolution toward ever-stronger anti-racist positions, Kendi writes that he displayed a “lingering double consciousness” of assimilationism and anti-racism, and therefore “reinforced as much racism as he struck down.”

He finds similar fault with Obama’s famous 2008 campaign speech on race. The candidate decried the politicians who prey on white worries over affirmative action and crime, but then conceded that such resentments are “grounded in legitimate concerns” and described a “racial stalemate” in America, with its implication of equivalent blame. “Obama ended up following in the racist footsteps of every president since Richard Nixon,” Kendi laments, “legitimizing racist resentments, saying those resentments were not racist, and redirecting those resentments toward political opponents.”

[The ‘racial procrastination’ of Barack Obama]

Obama has often noted that race relations in America have improved, even if we still have a long way to go. Kendi doesn’t buy it: “With every civil rights victory and failure, this line of reasoning became the standard past-future declaration of assimilationists. . . . They purposefully sidestepped the present reality of racism.”

Even Brown v. Board of Education, the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that desegregated public schools, is, in Kendi’s reading, marred by racism. Chief Justice Earl Warren “essentially offered a racist opinion in this landmark case: separate Black educational facilities were inherently unequal and inferior because Black students were not being exposed to White students,” he writes.

So, in a world where the Brown opinion is racist, what does it take to not be? “In order to be truly antiracists, we must also oppose all the sexism, homophobia, colorism, ethnocentrism, nativism, cultural prejudice, and class bias teeming and teaming with racism to harm many Black lives,” Kendi asserts, in a full-throated embrace of intersectionality. In other words, oppose everything, at all times, all at once. For instance, the author criticizes the reaction of female suffragists to the 15th Amendment’s enfranchisement of black men. “It stung leading suffragist Susan B. Anthony to think the Constitution had ‘recognized’ Black men ‘as the political superiors of all the noble women,’ ” Kendi writes.
I scoured “Stamped From the Beginning” for someone — anyone — who does not turn out to hold even tacit racist beliefs. Anti-prison activist Angela Davis and writer Zora Neale Hurston emerge unscathed. (At least, I’m pretty sure.) To his enormous credit, Kendi does not spare himself, admitting that before his book research, he unwittingly harbored prejudice. “Fooled by racist ideas,” he admits, “I did not fully realize that the only thing wrong with Black people is that we think something is wrong with Black people.”

Guyatt, a University of Cambridge historian, focuses on the principle that the Brown decision overturned: “separate but equal.” It was enshrined in the 1896 Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson, but Guyatt traces it to the founders, arguing that the presumption of eventual separation of the races is what enabled early reformers to reconcile slavery and the promise of the Declaration, at least in their own minds. Proposing the relocation of black Americans to an African colony “enabled ‘moderate’
opponents of slavery to denounce human bondage without accepting black citizenship, to believe that they were upholding their principles while denying non-whites a place in the expanding republic,” Guyatt writes.

“Bind Us Apart” reads like a subset of Kendi’s book, a deeper dive into an early era of American prejudice, and one that examines the treatment of Native Americans as well as black slaves. Thomas Jefferson distinguished between the two, writing in his “Notes on the State of Virginia” that the “vivacity and activity of mind” among Indians “is equal to ours in the same situation,” far different from his views of persons of African descent. And while some leaders proposed intermarriage as a strategy to integrate Native Americans — Patrick Henry suggested offering cash payments to any white man marrying a native woman and a smaller payout for each child they had — attempts to “civilize” them came to involve resettlement to ever narrower stretches of land. Such efforts to physically move and separate non-white populations were popular because they “promised to relieve liberal whites from the challenges of integration,” Guyatt explains.

Although his vision is less dogmatic and unforgiving than Kendi’s, his book is also an attack on the prejudice of the well-meaning. Today, America “retains an instinct for racial separation that manifests itself even among those who foreswear racist beliefs,” Guyatt writes. “You can see it in the beating or killing of African Americans who end up in the ‘wrong’ neighborhood, or in the chronic problem of housing discrimination in major cities, or in the struggles against poverty facing Native and African American communities across the country.”

Together, these works offer a grim vision of America and of human nature, but one consistent with an era when the prison warden has supplanted the slave master, and when Black Lives Matter is the latest incarnation of a civil rights movement that has no reason to stop moving. The greatest service Kendi and Guyatt provide is the ruthless prosecution of American ideas about race for their tensions, contradictions and unintended consequences. And yet I have greater difficulty embracing the notion that, as Kendi argues, progress on race is inevitably stalked by the advance of racism and that, on an individual level, falling short in specific instances somehow taints the whole of a person.

The old one-drop rule for determining race was based on prejudice and pseudoscience. A one-drop rule for determining racism seems only slightly less unfair, no matter how well-intentioned.

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