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Review of How to be an Antiracist (An African's View)

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(An African's View) *How to be an Antiracist*. Ibram X. Kendi. New York. Random House Publishing Group. 2019. Hardcover. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0525509288

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Ibram X Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* discusses the complexities and contradictions of racial issues in the USA, alerting us to the many dimensions and manifestations of racism. From a historical perspective, he raises many issues and offers many insights, and I can only highlight a few of them.

Kendi points out, for example, that there has been a tradition of representing African American culture as "a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture" (83). It is a tradition with a long history, whose essential message has been that it was to the advantage of Black people to assimilate into White culture.

According to Kendi, White standards are used to guide and dictate Black lives and consciousness to the extent that it is "a racial crime to be yourself if you are not white in America. It is a racial crime to look like yourself or empower yourself if you are not White" (38). Kendi says that the belief in the superiority of white culture is shared by both assimilationists, who say that non-whites can attain white cultural standards, and by segregationists who say that non-whites cannot attain those standards.

Kendi offers some interesting insights, saying, for example, that what is called civilization "is often a euphemism for cultural racism" (85). That racism can be disguised as something desirable is a wake-up call to the unwary. Equally interesting, in my view, is Kendi's defense of Black youth fashion, which mainstream Americans frown upon. He describes it as evidence and expression of creativity: "Freshness was about not just getting the hottest gear but devising fresh ways to wear it, in the best tradition of fashion: experimentation, elaboration, and impeccable precision" (84).

Taking his cue from W.E.B. DuBois, Kendi notes that a major problem afflicting Black people is double consciousness, which DuBois described in one instance as "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (28-9). In place of double consciousness, Kendi proposes "dueling consciousness," explaining that "the duel within Black consciousness seems to usually be between antiracist and assimilationist ideas" (29).

There are many observations in Kendi's book that I found particularly memorable, and here is one of them: "One of racism's harms is the way it falls on the unexceptional Black person who is asked to be extraordinary just to survive—and even worse, the Black screwup who faces the abyss after one error, while the White screwup is handed second chances and empathy. This shouldn't be surprising: One of the fundamental values of racism to White people is that it makes success attainable for even unexceptional Whites, while success, even moderate success, is usually reserved for extraordinary Black people" (93-94).

One of Kendi's concerns is to define the root cause of the problems faced by Black people in the USA. In the final analysis, Kendi attributes the problems to policies rather than the Black people

themselves. He chides those who think otherwise and seek, for example, to inculcate, values of hard work, family values and so on, in Black people. He says that his own parents fell in the same trap, in that “they reverted to striving to save and civilize Black people rather than liberate them” (28).

Kendi is admirable for his humility and spirit of self-criticism. While pointing out the racism in other people, he admits his own racism and explains how he has been struggling to free himself from it. He goes farther and challenges the well-established claim that black people cannot be racist because they have no power. He offers examples of powerful Blacks, such as judges, police officers and senators who, even though their power might be limited, fail to use it to advance antiracist agendas. Instead, they perpetuate racist practices.

The sections of *How to be Antiracist* that concern sexuality and sexual identity were rather difficult for me to come to terms with. Kendi does his best to explain the intersections between sexuality, sexual identity and racism. However, even before reading this book, I have found myself increasingly bewildered by the conversations around these issues in the USA, and in the face of proliferating sexual identities, I am lost for words.

I differ with Kendi on some issues, certainly, such as his reference to “the Reagan revolution” (27). With my Marxist understanding of the concept of revolution, I found this to be a strange idea. A revolution is complete transformation of the social economic system, and the USA has never ceased being a capitalist country.

It was with mixed feelings that I agreed to review *How to be an Antiracist*. As an African living in the USA, I find the American preoccupation with race and racial issues strange, to say the least. However, I agreed to review the book hoping to offer an African perspective on it. As it turns out, I have learned much from it. It has revealed to me realities that lie beneath the surface and are not easily perceived or understood by Africans. I highly recommend this book to fellow Africans.