**A “STUPID LACK OF CLARITY”: ON KENDI’S DEFINITIONS OF *RACIST* AND *ANTIRACIST***

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Near the beginning of his huge bestseller *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi says, “Some of my most consequential steps toward being an antiracist have been the moments when I arrived at basic definitions. To be an antiracist is to set lucid definitions of racism/antiracism, racist/antiracist policies, racist/antiracist ideas, racist/antiracist people.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Unfortunately, for those who wish to be antiracists, Kendi’s definitions are anything but lucid. In fact, they are quite murky. This is particularly the case with respect to Kendi’s definitions of *racist* and *antiracist*.

Murkiness first arises with respect to what Kendi is trying to do with his definitions. It’s clear that he’s not simply reporting on common usage by providing lexical definitions. Kendi is aware that most English speakers take the word *racist* to be a pejorative. Yet, Kendi insists that the word “is not…a pejorative…[i]t is descriptive.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps, then, Kendi’s definitions are meant to be stipulative. Such definitions are fairly standard in academic writing. Because academic writing requires a certain level of precision, it is common for academics to stipulate the meaning of a word that is used in too imprecise a way by ordinary speakers. Setting aside the problem that Kendi’s definitions are anything but precise, as we shall soon see, there is another problem. Typically, when academics stipulate the meaning of a word, they will use language like, “For the purposes of this essay, I will use such-and-such-a-word to mean…” Kendi uses no such language.

Perhaps Kendi’s definitions are intended to be revisionary. A revisionary definition is a definition that departs in some significant way from ordinary language. However, authors who introduce revisionary definitions are expected to argue for them. Kendi never provides an argument for why we should accept any of his definitions. Also, if Kendi were providing revisionary definitions, then why does he say, “one of the core principles of antiracism is to return the word ‘racist’…*back* to its proper usage”?[[3]](#footnote-3) This doesn’t make sense if his definition of *racist* is supposed to be revisionary.

If we do go back, we will find one of the earliest definitions of the word *racism* in the anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s *Race: Science and Politics*. There, Benedict says, “Racism is an unproven assumption of the biological and perpetual superiority of one human group over another.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet, in his book *Stamped from the Beginning*, Kendi explicitly rejects Benedict’s definition for being too narrow.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So Kendi’s definitions are not lexical, stipulative, or revisionary. But they are something, and Kendi describes arriving at them as though they were profound discoveries - discoveries he intends to share with ignorant ordinary English speakers.[[6]](#footnote-6)

And yet Kendi cannot seem to shake off ordinary language, at least not with respect to the word *racist*. If that word is simply a descriptive term, not a pejorative, then to say that a policy or idea is racist does not, by itself, entail condemnation. But Kendi certainly uses the word to condemn all kinds of policies and ideas. And in an interview recorded after the publication of *HTBA*, Kendi says that he’s not denying that the word is condemnatory.[[7]](#footnote-7) In that case, how is the word a descriptive term? Perhaps what Kendi means in saying that *racist* is not a pejorative, it’s descriptive, he means that *racist* has descriptive content. But having descriptive content does not set pejorative terms apart from descriptive terms.[[8]](#footnote-8) What makes a pejorative a pejorative (in part) is that, in addition to having descriptive content, it has negative evaluative content.

Moving on to the content of Kendi’s definitions, Kendi says that a racist is “[o]ne who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In contrast, an antiracist is “[o]ne who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Kendi believes that racist ideas are created to justify racist policies. Racist ideas do not lead to racist policies, rather, history shows that the reverse is true. Therefore, Kendi focuses on defining racist policy (and antiracist policy) before moving on to racist ideas (and antiracist ideas).

Kendi says that a racist policy is “any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups” and “an antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups.”[[11]](#footnote-11) There are three parts to these definitions that need cashing out. First, what counts as a racial group? Second, what counts as racial (in)equity? And, third, what does it mean for a policy to produce or sustain (in)equity between racial groups?

By a “racial group” Kendi does not simply mean an entire race (the black race, the white race, the Asian race, etc.). *HTBA* includes all kinds of racial groups: groups that exist at the intersection of race and nationality, race and gender, race and sexuality, race and ethnicity, race and class, race and age, race and region, race and city, even race and neighborhood. Kendi refers to black residents of Manassas, Virginia,[[12]](#footnote-12) as well as white Texas suburbanites and Asian-Americans in New York City’s Chinatown.[[13]](#footnote-13) Kendi appears to mean any group that one racializes: “When we refer to a group as Black or White or another racial identity – Black Southerners as opposed to Southerners – we are racializing that group.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, one racializes a group whenever one takes a set of people and zeroes in on a subset of those people who are members of a particular race. If this is right, then there is a potentially infinite number of racial groups.

What is racial inequity? Kendi, says racial inequity exists “when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing,” whereas “[r]acial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

To say one is for equity or equality (Kendi uses the terms interchangeably, as will I) is to express an incomplete idea. One needs to know with respect to what dimension one favors equality. Many of Kendi’s examples involve inequalities in material well-being. The first example Kendi uses to illustrate the concept of racial inequity is the difference in the percentage of whites who own their own homes relative to blacks and Latinos.[[16]](#footnote-16) Kendi also cites the relative rates of poverty and unemployment, as well as levels of wealth and income, between blacks and whites generally, and between more particular racial groups.[[17]](#footnote-17) Kendi also cites the difference in life expectancy between blacks and whites.[[18]](#footnote-18) But does Kendi support equality of *outcome* with respect to material well-being or equality of *opportunity* with respect to achieving any level of material well-being? Kendi says that if there is equality of opportunity there will be equal outcomes.[[19]](#footnote-19) Therefore, I suspect Kendi supports equality of opportunity and takes inequality of outcome as evidence of inequality of opportunity.

Some of Kendi’s examples of racial disparities are not inequities *per se*, rather, they involve proportional overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial group in some category, relative to the representation of that group in the nation as a whole.[[20]](#footnote-20) For example, Kendi mentions the overrepresentation of African Americans among the incarcerated and those shot by the police, and the underrepresentation of African Americans in the middle class.[[21]](#footnote-21)

We still do not yet have a clear enough picture of what Kendi means by racial (in)equity. For instance, where does equal *treatment* fall into all of this? Some of Kendi’s examples express concern over unequal treatment.[[22]](#footnote-22) But if racial equity includes equal treatment, then why does Kendi so quickly dismiss race-neutral policies, which are obvious examples of racial equity in the form of equal treatment? And how is concern for equal treatment supposed to square with the following passage?

[I]f racial discrimination is defined as treating, considering, or making a distinction in favor or against an individual based on that person’s race, then racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Is Kendi insinuating that if equal treatment matters, it only matters in the service of equal opportunity for material well-being? Is he just defending affirmative action policies? What’s going on?

Even if we had a clearer idea of what Kendi means by racial (in)equity, we would still need to know what it means for a policy to produce or sustain racial (in)equity. This is not as straightforward as it might seem because Kendi insists that all policies are racist or antiracist: “There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

It’s hard to know how seriously one should take Kendi here. The principle of charity suggests that we don’t take what Kendi says here literally. After all, Kendi can’t really think that Switzerland’s ban on boiling live lobsters[[25]](#footnote-25) produces or sustains racial equity or inequity. On the other hand, given how seriously Kendi takes the work of being an antiracist, it seems uncharitable not to take Kendi literally. But then we need to know how a policy that seems so far removed from race, like Switzerland’s ban on boiling live lobsters, produces or sustains racial equity or inequity.[[26]](#footnote-26) Nothing Kendi says sheds light on this issue.

Even if we could get straight on what is meant by a policy producing or sustaining racial (in)equity, there are still a host of questions that need to be answered if one is going to be an effective antiracist. For instance, what if a policy will produce racial equity along some dimension but inequity along another dimension? Some people argue that raising the federal minimum wage would go a long way in closing the income gap between blacks and whites.[[27]](#footnote-27) On the other hand, some argue that the minimum wage is responsible for the relatively high black unemployment rate (in particular among young black men).[[28]](#footnote-28) What if raising the federal minimum wage would both decrease the racial income gap and widen the racial unemployment gap (a state of affairs that is technically possible)? In that case, should an antiracist support or oppose raising the federal minimum wage?

What about a policy that creates equity between one set of racial groups but inequity between another set of racial groups? For instance, suppose a tax would lead to greater equity between black and white residents of New York City, but greater inequity between black and white residents of Upstate New York? Should an antiracist support or oppose the tax? Add to this the possibility that there is an infinite number of racial groups and it becomes difficult to see how one could possibly answer this question.

What about considerations of political feasibility? Can an antiracist support a measure that will produce racial inequity if it’s the only politically feasible alternative to a measure that would produce even greater inequity? Kendi brings up how the majority of the Congressional Black Caucus voted, in the mid-1990’s, in favor of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. As Kendi describes the case, these congressional members worried that by not voting for the bill as it was written, a rewrite of the bill would have not included *any* funding for drug treatment and violence-prevention programs. This, however, does not spare these people Kendi’s condemnation.[[29]](#footnote-29) So is the message that antiracists must always settle for the status quo, if the perfect is not achievable?

Let us turn now to ideas. According to Kendi, a racist idea is “any idea that suggests that one racial group is inferior or superior to another group in any way.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Elsewhere, Kendi says that to say something is wrong with a racial group is to say something is inferior about that group, and therefore is to express a racist idea.[[31]](#footnote-31) In contrast, “An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences – that there is nothing wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Does Kendi literally mean that it is racist to think that a racial group is inferior/superior in *any* way? What about with respect to knowing certain things about racism? For instance, is it racist to say that, with respect to knowing what it’s like to experience anti-black racism, black people are superior to white people? What about with respect to trivial things? What if someone had the (silly) idea that white people are better than black people at hopping on one foot (suppose this person places no importance on foot-hopping skills). Would that be racist? What about claims that refer to the racial groups collectively as opposed to distributively? For instance, making inferior/superior claims about racial groups with respect to their means, medians, modes, rates, etc. regarding some variable? What about time-indexed comparisons (“In the Middle Ages, white European culture was much less advanced or sophisticated as any Asian culture in the Far East. However, things began to change during the Renaissance.”)? What about claims that do not attribute the inferiority or superiority to race *as such*?

Kendi seems to believe that it is racist to say something is wrong with a racial group even when referring to the group collectively, what one says about the racial group is time-indexed, and one does not attribute the wrong-making feature to race, as such. After all, these are the kinds of claims about racial groups that Kendi calls assimilationist[[33]](#footnote-33) and culturally racist.[[34]](#footnote-34) For instance, take the claim that there are too many absent fathers among African Americans. Such a claim is not about all African American men. Such a claim is not even about the majority of African American men. It’s a generalization about African Americans taken collectively: the relative frequency of children growing up without fathers is higher in the African American population than in other racial populations in America. Such claims are typically about African Americans post-1950’s (blame is often laid on Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society). And, given what has just been said, no one is attributing this phenomenon to “blackness” in any biological sense. Social critics who bring up this phenomenon invariably bring it up in the hope that it will go away. This wouldn’t make sense if they all thought that it was a black man’s racial destiny to be sexually ravenous. Nonetheless, anyone who brings up the issue of absent black fathers as a problem is guilty of expressing a racist idea, according to Kendi.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Yet how does one account for all the times Kendi says negative things about racial groups? For instance, Kendi lodges some criticism at white people. As one example:

White people have their own dueling consciousness, between the segregationist and the assimilationist: the slave trader and the missionary, the proslavery exploiter and the antislavery civilizer, the eugenicist and the melting pot-ter, the mass incarcerator and the mass developer, the Blue Lives Matter and the All Lives Matter, the not-racist nationalist and the not-racist American.[[36]](#footnote-36)

At one point, Kendi criticizes white people, dark-skinned blacks, and light-skinned blacks:

White people and Dark people reject and envy Light people. White people have historically employed the one-drop rule – that even one drop of Black blood makes you Black – to bar Light people from pure Whiteness. Dark people employ the two-drop rule, as I call it – two drops of White blood make you less Black – to bar Light people from pure Blackness. Light people employ the three-drop rule, as I call it – three drops of Black blood mean you’re too Dark – to bar Dark people from pure Lightness.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Kendi also targets the black middle class for its racism, especially during the 1980’s and 1990’s: “The class [black middle class] that challenged racist policies from the 1950’s through the 1970’s now began challenging other Black people in the 1980’s and 1990’s.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

In each of these passages Kendi is, no doubt, talking in loose generic terms. He is not referring to every individual member of these racial groups, perhaps not even most. He’s not suggesting that the relevant wrong-making features have always, or will always, be present. And he’s definitely not ascribing the cause of these wrong-making features to race or skin color. But none of this gets the “assimilationist” or “cultural racist” off the hook. So why are Kendi’s claims about white people, dark-skinned blacks, light-skinned blacks, and the black middle class not racist?

On top of all this, why is it not racist of Kendi to be criticizing America for its racism? According to Kendi, an antiracist must be a cultural relativist: “To be antiracist is to see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals.”[[39]](#footnote-39) If this is so, then what makes it ok to criticize a group for its racist practices and norms? Isn’t criticizing a racist culture racist?

To add to the confusion, Kendi says that there is no such thing as a nonracist idea. All ideas are either racist or antiracist.[[40]](#footnote-40) Does this literally mean that any proposition the mind could entertain is either racist or antiracist? What about ideas that have nothing to do with race, like “2+2=4,” “McDonald’s sells French fries,” and “Lobsters feel pain”? What about explanations for racial inequalities that cite neither racist policy nor racial inferiority as the cause?[[41]](#footnote-41) Just like with Kendi’s claim that there is no such thing as a nonracist policy, the principle of charity pulls us in different directions.

Having scrutinized Kendi’s definitions of *racist* and *antiracist*, we see that, despite his intentions, Kendi has not done a very good job of explaining to his readers how to avoid being racists and how to be antiracists. If Kendi ever feels frustrated with the inability of his readers to understand his ideas, I hope he will recall his own message of humility: “When people fail to consume our convoluted antiracist ideas, we blame their stupidity rather than our stupid lack of clarity.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

1. Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. (Italics mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1940), v-vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *HTBA*, 17. It’s worth noting that other self-styled “antiracist” authors do not define *racist* in the way Kendi does. For instance, Robin DiAngelo, defines *racism* in such a way that only white people can be racist. See Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 19-24. Kendi, on the other hand, devotes two chapters in *HTBA* (chapters 10 and 11) to rebutting the claim that only white people can be racist. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibram X. Kendi, “Ibram X. Kendi Wants to Redefine Racism,” interview by Ezra Klein, *Vox Conversations*, October 7, 2019, podcast audio, 33:53, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ibram-x-kendi-wants-to-redefine-racism/id1081584611?i=1000452609664>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Ralph DiFranco puts it, “A speaker who calls an Italian person ‘spic’ does not merely say something offensive and derogatory – said speaker simultaneously makes a factual error in classifying his target incorrectly.” See Robin DiFranco, “Pejorative Language,” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/pejorati/#SH2a>, accessed January 20, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *HTBA*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 157, 189, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In *HTBA*, Kendi uses the expression *disparity* more or less as a synonym for inequity or inequality. However, in *Stamped*, Kendi uses the expression “racial disparity” to specifically refer to proportional overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial group: “By racial disparities, I mean how racial groups are not statistically represented according to their populations.” *Stamped*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *HTBA,* 25, 28, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Examples of alleged unequal treatment that Kendi mentions include the likelihood of a black person being jailed for a drug offense compared to a white person, and the likelihood of a black student being suspended compared to a white student. Ibid., 25, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Francesca Street, “Switzerland Bans Boiling Lobsters Alive,” *CNN*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/switzerland-lobster-boiling-banned/index.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Maybe Kendi means that a policy *sustains* *racial inequity* simply in virtue of *not causing racial equity* (and vice versa). In that case, the claim, “Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups,” can be translated as: *Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is either causing or not causing racial inequity or equity between racial groups*. But the latter sentence is trivially true. On this interpretation, rather than making an apparently ridiculous claim, Kendi is making a vacuous claim.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ellora Derenoncourt, Claire Montialoux, and Kate Bahn, “Why Minimum Wages are a Critical Tool for Achieving Racial Justice in the U.S. Labor Market,” *Washington Center for Equitable Growth*, October 29, 2020, <https://equitablegrowth.org/why-minimum-wages-are-a-critical-tool-for-achieving-racial-justice-in-the-u-s-labor-market/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Thomas Sowell, *Discrimination and Disparities*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 52-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “ASSIMILATIONIST: One who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group.” Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “CULTURAL RACIST: One who is creating a cultural standard and imposing a cultural hierarchy among racial groups.” Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 184-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. On the interpretation where “sustains racial inequity” means “does not cause racial equity” (see footnote 29), Kendi’s claim that all racial inequalities are the result of racist policy becomes trivially true. After all, it’s trivially true that the existence of racial inequality along some dimension is sufficient evidence that existing policies are not causing racial equality along that dimension. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)