

# The New Criterion

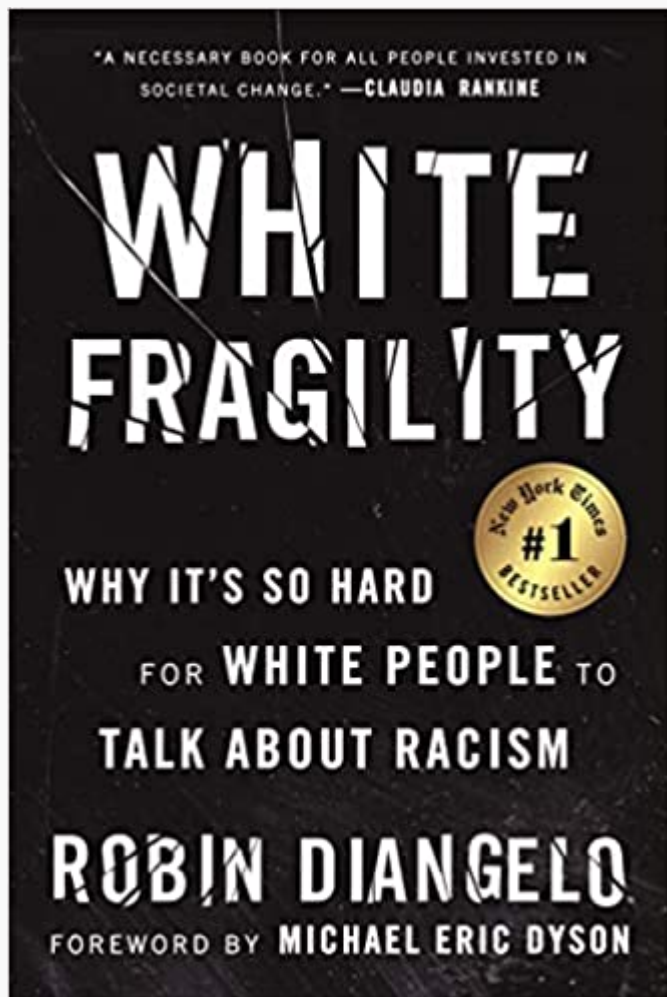
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## Hypocrite hector

by Anthony Daniels

*A review of [White Fragility](#) by Robin DiAngelo & [How to Be an Antiracist](#) by Ibram X. Kendi.*

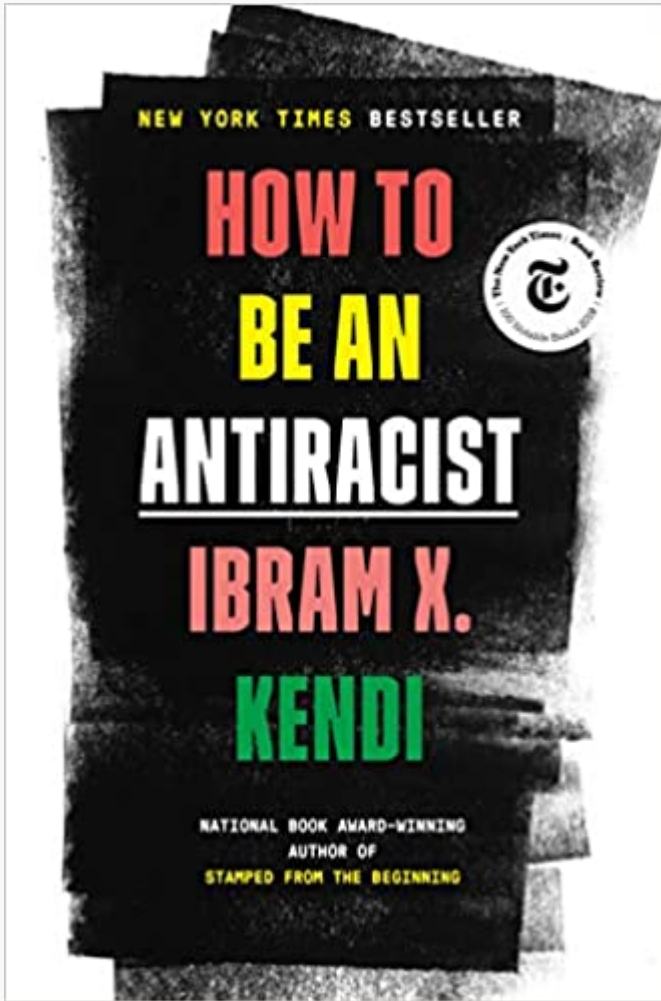
### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Robin DiAngelo*

*White Fragility*

Beacon Press, 192 pages, \$16.00



Ibram X. Kendi

How to Be an Antiracist

One World, 320 pages, \$27.00

*Compared with the labour of reading through these volumes, all other labour—the labour of thieves on the treadmill, of children in factories, of negroes in sugar plantations—is an agreeable recreation.*

—Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Burleigh and his Times* (1832)

These two best-selling books about racism—*White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo, and *How to Be an Antiracist*, by Ibram X. Kendi—are tedious not because they are long but because of their almost unrelievedly hectoring tone.<sup>1</sup> You feel in reading them that you have been cornered at a party by a monomaniac who will not let you escape until he has preached you into total silence, if not acquiescence. I can only conclude from their sales that people like being hectored.

Of the two books, Kendi's is slightly the better, for it is part-memoir and occasionally has an anecdote from his life that is not told wholly through the lens of ideology, and which actually does speak to the undoubted difficulties of blacks in America with which it is easy to sympathize.

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He recounts how, when he was very young, he stood by while a black bully nicknamed Smurf, assisted by his gang of louts, stole from and beat a small Indian boy on the school bus. His failure to intervene on the boy's behalf was caused by the fear that Smurf and the gang would turn on him if he did so. While his cowardice was no doubt prudent—he wouldn't have saved the Indian boy, and there would have been two injured parties instead of one—this episode troubled him. I experienced a very similar episode in my childhood sixty years ago, though in a very different environment, and it likewise worried me. At what point, exactly, does one risk one's comfort, one's career, one's safety, and even one's life, for a matter of principle?

DiAngelo's book displays a curious admixture of influences: the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Jimmy Swaggart, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Uriah Heep, the four of them being present in approximately equal proportion.

DiAngelo has apparently made a career of anti-racist struggle sessions in which ordinary employees of various organizations must confess publicly to their racism however hidden it might be, as university professors, primary school teachers, doctors working in slums, etc., had once in China to confess to bourgeois propensities and counter-revolutionary ideas. They may never have uttered a racist sentiment, they may never have been rude to a person of another race, let alone violent towards one, they may have friends of other races or even be married to a person of another race, but they carry racism deep within them like Original Sin, with this difference: there can be no redemption from it even after having read DiAngelo's book and attended her struggle sessions. Personally, I should not be at all surprised if the end result of all her efforts, at least among the men she has "trained" (which is to say tried to indoctrinate), was to have acted as a recruitment officer for the Ku Klux Klan.

After thirty years of constant work of supposedly anti-racist training, she confesses—like the tearful Jimmy Swaggart—to being still guilty of racism herself, promising to reform, although reform is *ex hypothesi* impossible because racism is in her society's dna, as it were. One is reminded of the type of psychoanalysis which after thirty years of hourly sessions four times a week fails to get to the root of the analysand's problem, let alone solve it, because it doesn't even know what the problem is. But failure is also an opportunity, because, like psychoanalysis, the more anti-racist training fails, the more it is needed. DiAngelo, all credit to her, has found an economic niche for herself for the rest of her life. One has a sneaking admiration for such entrepreneurs. They are the asset-strippers of the soul.

By demonstrating how bad a person she is, DiAngelo demonstrates how good a person she is.

As for Uriah Heep, DiAngelo has obviously heard, read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested (as my teachers used to demand of me) *David Copperfield*. Her oleaginous approach to all “people of color,” as she coyly calls them, makes Uriah Heep seem positively blunt and straight-talking. DiAngelo regards all nonwhite people, *ex officio*, as being incapable of exaggeration or unjustified self-pity, let alone of lying. As well as being sycophantic, this is, to coin a word, racist, for one of the most important manifestations of free will, and therefore of humanity itself, is the capacity to lie. In effect, then, she regards “people of color” as infra-human truth-uttering mechanisms: they speak, therefore what they say is true. No critical faculties need be applied to what they say.

**B**y demonstrating how bad a person she is, DiAngelo demonstrates how good a person she is. A story that she relates towards the end of her book illustrates to perfection her self-satisfaction and moral grandiosity that masquerade as confession of sin.

DiAngelo and two other members of her “equity team” (whose activities she assumes are as self-explanatory to the reader as those of, say, a surgical or football team), both of whom are black women, are discussing a new website with a web-designer, another black woman called Angela. During their conversation, DiAngelo mentions not only that Angela’s survey of what they want for their website struck her as tedious, but also that the courses run by the equity team are not always successful: in fact, one was so unappreciated that a leader of it, yet another black woman called Deborah, was asked not to return. DiAngelo attempts—*mirabile dictu*—a joke. “The white people were scared by Deborah’s hair,” she says.

A few days later, one of the team members (it is significant, surely, that she employs the possessive pronoun, *my* team members) tells her that Angela was offended by her joke. The story continues:

We discuss my feelings (embarrassment, shame, guilt) and then she helps me identify the various ways my racism was revealed in that interaction. After this processing, I feel ready to repair that relationship. I ask Angela to meet with me, and Angela agrees.

I open by asking Angela, “Would you be willing to grant me the opportunity to repair the racism I perpetrated toward you in that meeting?”

One can almost see DiAngelo leaning forward, back hunched, rubbing her hands together in a gesture of anxious humility. Be ‘umble, Robin, be ‘umble.

Angela then explains that she did not know DiAngelo and did not want her to joke about black women's hair. Needless to say, DiAngelo did not point out that she was not joking about black women's hair, she was joking about *a* black woman's hair, namely Deborah's. She accepts the criticism as justified, and goes on to ask whether she had missed anything else problematic in the meeting.

"Yes," she [Angela] replies. "That survey? I wrote that survey. And I have spent my life justifying my intelligence to white people."

My chest constricts as I immediately realize the impact of my glib dismissal of the survey. I acknowledge this impact and apologize.

The question of whether the survey served any purpose simply does not arise; the only important question is the race of the person who devised it.

Pressing home her advantage, Angela asks "The next time you do something like this, would you like the feedback publicly or privately?" DiAngelo's answer shows her to be in true apostolic succession to Uriah Heep:

I answer that given my role as an educator, I would appreciate receiving the feedback publicly as it is important for white people to see that I am also engaged in a lifelong process of learning and growth.

So sickly is this that one feels as if one has eaten an entire box of chocolate creams in about a minute. It induces nausea.

DiAngelo is a tremendous moral narcissist. This is shown by her use of the term "people of color." Until page 31, I thought that it meant black, but on that page I learned that it meant non-white. She shows no interest in the question of whether the Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Burmese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Austronesians, Amerindians, and Africans, et al., would all be delighted to be put in the same category, let alone interest in their many cultures. On page 33, we read:

White supremacy is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of color; it is the deeper premise that supports the idea—the definition of whites as the norm or standard of human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.

Lumping non-white people together as "people of color" is precisely an instance of what she criticizes: this is what happens when moral rhetoric far outruns intelligence.

Quite apart from a certain lack of intelligence, DiAngelo admits towards the end of her book that she is of very bad character:

I have a racist worldview, deep racial bias, racist patterns, and investments in the racist system that has elevated me. Still, I don't feel guilty about racism.

All her readers, however, are likely to be in the same case; and anyway, the greater the sinner, the greater the saint.

Kendi agrees with DiAngelo on many things, but not all. He agrees with her that the kind of racist (according to their definition of racism) who is nice to blacks and even tries to help them advance in society is more dangerous than the kind of racist who joins a lynch mob and hangs an innocent man, because the latter is prepared to declare openly his hatred of blacks, whereas the former is not (what might be called the “at-least-Hitler-was-sincere argument”). Kendi also agrees with her that the word “Asian” as applied to people is a useful category, though the last time it was used in such a highly political sense was by the Japanese when they were trying to establish their Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, not altogether to the liking of the Chinese and other Asians. Kendi’s use of the word “African” is not much better, for he has no real interest in or knowledge of Africa other than as an undifferentiated mass that is home to people who wear kente cloth and beat drums, which he assumes that they all do.

Like DiAngelo, he is a rhetorician with little regard to or for the truth: for example, he calls Brett Kavanaugh an abuser, without mentioning that the allegation was never remotely proved. He differs from DiAngelo in believing that it is not just whites who can be racists, but all human beings, and in this sense he is somewhat better than she. But he is terribly muddled on the question of how far it is permissible to attribute group characteristics to populations without being racist. I do not think it is worthwhile trying to extract a coherent doctrine from him.

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He is, however, consistent in one great error throughout his book: he does not distinguish inequity from inequality.

He is, however, consistent in one great error throughout his book: he does not distinguish inequity from inequality. He never uses the latter word. He does not appear to understand there could be no greater inequity than equality in a world of effort or lack of it. He believes that all differences in outcome between groups can be the result only of prejudice and discrimination, and that if the latter were removed the former would disappear. Nor does he recognize, even faintly, that to bring about the equality between groups that he believes is the only equitable arrangement for society would require a totalitarian regime that would make North Korea seem like a libertarian’s dream.

It will perhaps come as no surprise that he is not an admirer of capitalism. His historiography is that of a rebellious sixteen-year-old who wants to irritate his traditionally minded history teacher. He believes, for example, that Henry the Navigator, or rather his more practical Portuguese followers, destroyed the peace of Africa, which until then had been perfect and universal. I open my *Cambridge History of Africa*, Volume 3, at random. It falls open at page 291. My eye alights on the following:

As far as the establishment of Bornu was concerned, these hopeful prospects were very far from being realized in the early days. Dynastic feuding continued to wrack the Saidfawa even in their refuge; and, although the sources are not explicit about this, it seems almost indubitable that warfare with the So continued, having been so fierce in the fourteenth century . . .

My eye could have landed on many similar pages relating to violent events in Africa preceding Henry the Navigator. But it is not history that Kendi is interested in, it is material for the propagation of resentment, of which he is an entrepreneur with the self-proclaimed goal of achieving power to impose his concept of “equity” on the world.

For him, the history of the world in general, and of America in particular, consists of genocide, slavery, and exploitation, and nothing else, carried out exclusively, as it happens, by Europeans, although Kendi does not hate whites *qua* whites. In Kendi’s telling, there is no achievement in this world, only perfidy (DiAngelo’s historiography is identical). Unearned privilege is not for him the inevitable precondition of civilized existence; neither does he say a word in praise, or even in acknowledgment, of the immense, if inevitably flawed, inheritance of Western civilization.

At the end of his book, Kendi tells us that he has developed cancer of the colon at an unusually early age. His wife, alas, developed cancer of the breast, likewise at an early age. This is very unlucky, and we feel for them. Both, however, receive the advanced medical treatment that might save their lives, as they would not have done if they had lived at any other time, or in most places, in human history. Kendi does not stop to wonder why this should be or how it came about. He has not the intellectual curiosity or detachment from his ego even to ask. Besides, to do so would not fit with his agenda, which is plainly totalitarian and power-mad.

Perhaps the most interesting question raised by these books is why, when they are so badly written, self-indulgent, and intellectually nugatory, when they are so plainly written in the spirit of what Karl Popper called reinforced dogmatism, they should be so popular among the Western intelligentsia. Let us hope that this is not a question for an Edward Gibbon of the next millennium to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, by Robin DiAngelo; Beacon Press, 192 pages, \$16.

*How to Be an Antiracist*, by Ibram X. Kendi; One World, 320 pages, \$27.

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**Anthony Daniels** is a contributing editor of *City Journal*.

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