

# STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING BY IBRAM KENDI

I'm on the road, which is great for reading, but not so much for writing. I just finished Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. It won the National Book Award for 2016. The citation reads:

Stamped from the Beginning turns our ideas of the term "racism" upside-down. Ibram X. Kendi writes as a thoughtful cultural historian, aware that he is challenging deeply held, often progressive assumptions. Using a masterful voyage through the history of U.S. political rhetoric, beginning with Cotton Mather and ending with hip-hop, he argues that even the most fervent anti-racists have been infected with that resilient virus. With his learning, he dares us to find a cure.

I always assumed that racist ideas arise from ignorance and hatred, or tribalism or some other source in individuals. Kendi says that first there was slavery, and then there were people who created justifications for slavery. When slavery was abolished the racist ideas persisted. There were plenty of people who benefited from using those racist ideas to exploit newly freed people for cheap labor. The ideas also proved useful in controlling the behavior of poor white people. There were plenty of people ready and willing to provide new versions of the old racist ideas, and many new ones.

Some of those people have names. Aristotle, for example, justified enslaving Caucasians from the north because the cold temperatures made them slow, stupid and ugly, and enslaving Africans

because the hot temperature made them burnt and slow-witted, unlike the perfect Greeks; therefore slavery was justified. Then there was Gomes Eanes de Zuzara, who wrote the first book about African slavery in 1452, explaining that the Africans were barbarians who needed to be saved into the right religion and civilized, and slavery was therefore a good thing. Others are nameless, the preachers, newspaper writers, authors, speakers, politicians and others who used their authority to spread poisonous ideas. The book is an intellectual and cultural history of anti-intellectual ideas and culture. Kendi describes a number of racist ideas and follows their twists and turns and the usually unavailing efforts to defeat them across the centuries in the US. In one chilling aside, he shows how these ideas formed the basis of anti-Semitic laws and theory in Nazi Germany. This is the subject of a new book, *Hitler's American Model*, reviewed here by Jeff Guo.

If racist ideas could be stomped out by facts and reason, the results of the study of the human genome should have done the trick. Craig Venter, who led the project, said that his work showed that it is not possible to tell the "race" of a person by looking at the genome. The genes of humans are 99.9% the same. That didn't stop the racists though: they announced that the different .1% was obviously the source of race and the superiority of white people, and they hired people to prove it. The idea of genetic differences cannot be eradicated.

The book forced me to think about how racist ideas are buried deep in my mind; about how African-Americans have been affected by and infected with racist ideas about themselves; about the relation between racism and other forms of prejudice; about the way these prejudices are used to create anger and hostility in our society; and much more. This wide range of ideas gives a good picture of the depth of Kendi's work.

The idea that racist policy comes before the

justification for racist policy is one thread that runs throughout the book. As Kendi shows, slavery came first, then the justifications for slavery. Race-based policies were in place, then came the justifications for race-based policies. This is the way many ideas we see in the world today came into existence. In economics, for example, trickle-down economics, an idea with roots in the 1890s, came back into common usage in the 1980s just in time to justify Reagan's enormous tax cuts for the rich. It didn't matter that it was laughably silly; it did its job of providing cover for people who benefited from the policy. Paul Krugman calls economic ideas like trickle-down zombie ideas, dead but on the move, eating brains. After reading Kendi's book, I now think of racist ideas as zombie ideas, wholly false and known to be false, utterly unsupported by evidence and still eating brains.

I feel like I've spent my life unlearning ideas I somehow picked up along the way. Some of those ideas were deeply wrong, some stupid, and some irrelevant. Maybe there are billions and billions of galaxies, but what difference does that make in my life as compared with the idea that there are billions of stars as I first learned? There are other ideas that are wrong, and I acted on them and maybe hurt other people, and I wish I never had those wrong ideas or done those things.

Either way, carrying around wrong ideas is intrinsically bad. But how do I know which ideas are wrong, especially in areas in which I have no training or expertise? Let's make that concrete with one of Kendi's examples. Suppose in the mid-1860s I read Charles Darwin's *On The Origin of Species*, and then read Herbert Spencer, who taught that human society evolves in the same way as fauna and flora. This led him and others to formulate what we now call Social Darwinism, another zombie idea used to justify racism. It led people to believe that white people were on top because they were the fittest, and Africans were at the bottom of society because they lost the battle; some even

argued that the African population would die out completely in short order.

I ask myself if I would have had the strength of mind to reject Spencer and the racist implications of his misbegotten theory. Maybe I would have, but I don't know. And that's a problem. Today there are people who are paid to invent new justifications for racism, and their tactics are more and more sophisticated. It's up to all of us to recognize them as the vicious lies they are, and try to stamp them out as they emerge. I just hope Kendi doesn't have to add new chapters to his book to cover a new set of racist lies.