



Book Review

Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America

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Kendi, I. X. (2017). *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist ideas in America*. New York, NY: Nation Books.

Ibram X. Kendi, in his thought provoking 2016 book (reprinted 2017), *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in American*, provides a captivating historical text that challenges readers to reconsider the evolution of both a racialized America and a racialized world. In the preface to the 2017 paperback reprint, the author presents a significant notion that, while perhaps unconsciously understood by some and latently presented in other tomes, serves as a key concept for his research: Per Kendi “As I carefully studied America’s racial past . . . I saw two distinct historical forces. . . . I saw the antiracist force of equality and the racist force of inequality marching forward, progressing in rhetoric, in tactics, in policies” (2017, p. x).

Herein lies the crux that readers should keep in mind: egalitarian deeds and racist actions do not “leapfrog” through history, they progress simultaneously. This consideration challenges a host of extant literature on historical racism as well as similar social science research. Kendi presents a potent idea to ponder while contemplating events such as the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteen amendments, the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights movement, and even the twenty-first-century presidential election of Barack Obama. While these social goods took place, racism existed in the background and would, as Kendi carefully explains, reemerge and overshadow egalitarian, anti-racist efforts.

To illustrate his point, Kendi takes readers on a tour of historical social thought and related events that shaped human thought and segregated civilization. To that end, *Stamped from the Beginning* provides a telling overview of racialized global history starting with fifteenth-century racist European publications to twenty-first-century racial arguments that typify modern political debate. Kendi’s book comprises 37 captivating chapters capped by an epilogue that urges readers to ceaselessly protest policies, laws, and leaders that harm anti-racist progress. From the book’s introduction forward, Kendi argues that racialized thought (negative and positive) was never a dualized conflict of segregation versus anti-segregation. Rather, arguments concerning race and race relations fell into one of three categories: segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist. Those historical individuals who represent the first category, segregationist, strove to keep people of African descent apart (spatially, mentally, etc.) from and socially beneath Caucasian people. Those people who represent the second category, assimilationist, argued that individuals

of African descent would be better off if they “assimilated” white culture. People representing the final category, antiracist, argued/continue to argue that the latter two are inherently wrong.

To showcase segregationism, assimilationism, and antiracism, chapters are grouped into five sections, each with their own “tour-guide” (historical figures whose era-specific narratives help contextualize associated chapters) (Kendi, 2017, p. 6). Section one begins with the life and racist theology of Cotton Mather; influential puritan reverend who preached that enslaved people’s souls would become “white” if they became Christians. Section two opens with Thomas Jefferson, US founding father and practitioner of early-American plantation capitalism. While Mather and Jefferson represent segregationist ideologies, section three presents the mid-nineteenth-century assimilationist, William Lloyd Garrison who co-founded the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator* and promoted ideas centered on the betterment of black lives through white acculturation. Section four is punctuated by the lived experiences of W. E. B. Du Bois who first agreed with tenants of racial assimilation, but later assumed an antiracist stance. The final section opens with the life and influence of Angela Davis; professor, author, and modern antiracist human-rights activist. These tour-guides represent only a portion of the litany of historical events that Kendi weaves together to present the history of racism.

Kendi’s book showcases how era-specific dominant voices promoted racist ideas or challenged their existence and proliferation. This timely text not only brings to light important historical instances of racism and anti-racism cast in various lights, it also provides a convincing critique of modern America set amidst the social turmoil of a post-Obama, current-Donald Trump political crisis where issues related to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, religious affiliation, immigrant status, etc. are misrepresented and used as fodder to promote twenty-first-century intolerance. *Stamped from the Beginning*, winner of multiple literary awards including the 2016 National Book Award for nonfiction, will continue to challenge readers for decades to come by providing a salient reconsideration of global and American history. At the same time, Kendi’s text encourages people of all backgrounds to cast off incorrect, antiquated racist ideologies and recognize that all human beings, regardless of race, are inherently equal.



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