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Michael A. Cowan

*Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, Department of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Oxford University*

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## **Seeing Race as We Are: Avoiding, Arguing, Aspiring**

**Michael A. Cowan**

*Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, Department of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Oxford University*

### **Abstract**

Racial conflict in the United States pushes people to positions of argument or avoidance, more or less intensely and for varying lengths of time, depending on external events like the murder of George Floyd. Neither stance produces the conversations required to seek common ground and compromise around racial issues. Argument alone deepens divisions and avoidance leaves them to metastasize in the social body. In an attempt to go beneath these two positions, this article first explains the role and form of interpretation in all conflict and dispute resolution and how it is shaped. Then it examines the concepts and strategies on race of seven identifiable groups. For example, whereas *individualists* reject identity politics and collective guilt for past wrongs and stress personal responsibility, *pragmatists* eschew ideologies on race, focusing instead on what they affirm. The article makes a deep critique of the *antiracist* assertion that those who fail to embrace its ideology are, by definition, racists. Finally the author discusses possible ways forward that reject dogmatic, either/or strategies in favor of a hermeneutical approach to matters of race including both sacred values and material interests.

*Michael Cowan is a psychologist and theologian with a long history of leadership in interracial and interfaith organizing and civil society leadership. He is a research associate at the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, Department of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Oxford University.*

## **Prologue**

In 1993 I went to Chicago to work on a large organizing effort under the supervision of Edward Chambers, protégé of Saul Alinsky and Executive Director for more than half a century of the Industrial Areas Foundation.<sup>1</sup> His unsurpassed practical wisdom about how ordinary people can shift the social world to be more in keeping with their values and priorities, was gleaned from half a century of organizing, reflecting, teaching, supervising, and reading. I had spent the two previous years working with an African American pastor to found an interracial and interfaith community organization in New Orleans, a majority black, racially charged city. During that time I began thinking and reading about race in a serious way for the first time at age forty. I wrote an essay called “Moving in White Circles,” which some people liked. I gave it to Ed at our first supervisory session, asking for his comments. He was a fierce giver of feedback and that is what I wanted. A week later he handed me the paper and said “Keep doing what you’re doing for ten more years, and you’ll have an analysis of race.” I put the essay away. I am twenty years behind on delivering this article, but I did keep on.

## **Attacking and Avoiding**

The word *race* signifies a human construction with social, economic, political, cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions.<sup>2</sup> Forming an interconnected whole, the construction of race is always in historical motion, out of which group and personal identities continually arise and revise. The sale of “enemy combatants” by African chiefs to European slave traders was early in the 400-year historical record of race in North America. Their forcible transfer of “twenty and some” Africans to the British colony of Jamestown in 1619 in the demonic ‘Middle Passage’ was succeeded by the slave codes, chattel slavery, segregation, desegregation, and institutional racism. It also included profound moments of earthshaking transformation including the Declaration of Independence, the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, and the civil rights movement and the legislation it provoked. The history of race in America is a profound mixture of evil and good. The felt gap between the world as it is on race and the “genuine interpersonal, intergroup doing” that Dr. King named the goal of the civil rights movement,<sup>3</sup> leaves significant numbers of people of all races in a state of tension. With apologies to David Foster Wallace, race “will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.”<sup>4</sup> Might the same not be said of all forms of intractable conflict?

One could be forgiven for thinking that there are only two forms of engagement on race in the United States today: avoiding and arguing. What varies is their intensity and that is dictated by the temperature of public events, such as Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin’s videotaped murder of George Floyd by suffocating him under his knee at the corner of Chicago and 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue in South Minneapolis. Much as with the slaughter of children in schools, as we wait for the next racial murder, Americans return to their current default positions of avoiding and arguing.

## **Interpretation: The Form of Life**

*We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.*<sup>5</sup>

To challenge the unilateral posturing that masquerades today as “honest conversation about race,” I will begin with a brief account of the form of making meaning at the heart of human existence in the world. Human beings each find and form our paths through life via the same process. Its name

is interpretation. Whatever our differences, however intractable our conflicts, whatever sacred values we hold, we are all always acting on our interpretations of life situations, usually without being aware of it. Apart from things that interrupt everyday life like hurricanes, cancer, and premature death, which can raise existential questions with shocking abruptness, we are typically unaware of understandings derived from the past, shadowing us in the present, and inclining us toward particular possible futures.

Interpretation in a nutshell: Human beings bring awareness of reality from life experience into every situation. This awareness makes possible and limits our interpretation of what is going on here and now. Interpretations make possible and limit our possible actions. We act, the situation reacts, and that affects our background understandings, which are continually changing through the interpretive process.

We bring to every situation in which we find ourselves an awareness of the world of which we are for the most part unaware. Following Charles Taylor,<sup>6</sup> I will call these ‘background understandings.’ Like ever-present ambient noise, they form the context of consciousness. Interpretations and actions flow from them. They are composed of three interwoven layers: evolutionary, sociocultural, and microsocal.

The first is the development, over six million years of human evolution, of neural mechanisms called ‘modules,’ ‘intuitive inference systems,’ or ‘domain-specific systems.’ Evolutionary psychologist Pascal Boyer writes that the human mind is composed from such mechanisms and offers some examples including detecting people’s line of gaze, telling friends from enemies, engaging in cooperative action, detecting social groups in our community, understanding narratives, inferring dominance from social interactions, and many others. He notes that intuitive inference systems are “outside of consciousness,” “specialized,” and “evolved properties of our species.”<sup>7</sup> The first layer of background understandings are genetic, species-based neural mechanisms for reacting instantaneously to situational events. This is the evolutionary layer of our background understandings.

The second layer of background understandings arises from being enculturated and socialized in a particular historical context. We find ourselves in cultures, speaking their languages, and internalizing their symbols, long before any explicit awareness of that formative process dawns on us. We are thrown into societies where we must navigate a complex constellation of roles and class formations, including issues of poverty, gender, and race. Languages and societies are historical. The past is always present in the present imagination and construction of the future. This is the sociocultural and historical layer of our background understandings.

The third layer of background understandings is absorbed in small, face-to-face groups. We are thrown into multi-generational families, neighborhoods, congregations, friendship groups, schools, and voluntary associations based on shared interests. It is here that senses of individual and group identities arise and transform over time. Microsocial structures cannot match the power of massive institutions, but do provide the ethical and religious narratives that inspire many to inject themselves into macro-social organizing efforts such as eliminating childhood poverty, reducing over-incarceration, and limiting global warming. At their best, micro-level relationships are the locus where friendship, love, support, and challenge are available to developing persons throughout life. This is the personal layer of our background understandings.

As human beings, we make our way through life together within this process of interpretation. Background understandings limit as well as make possible our grasp of what is happening and why, what might follow, and what our options are. Limited understanding is not a failure. It is the human condition, a limit on how much reality the eye of awareness can receive. For example, in

public life a fuller grasp of the circumstances and aspirations of allies and opponents can give rise to co-creating new possibilities for mutually beneficial change, as my group's interests and aspirations and yours become ours. In social worlds riven by intractable conflict, violence, and despair, comprehending the circumstances, concerns, and aspirations of enemies, opponents, allies, and ourselves is required of anyone who approaches matters like race with transformative intentions.

A young woman wrapped in an American flag sits in the middle of Row 300, directly above and behind the speaker's podium in an arena with 15,000 seats. One audience member's response to the event is a wave of long lost pride bringing tears because after years of disrespect and neglect, a candidate for president sees and speaks to her and her people. Another thinks "Make America Great Again [MAGA] is catchy, but when did we stop being great?" Another's anger churns as he joins the chorus of boos swelling around the arena as security officers escort the press corps to its bunker near the front. Another, wearing a campaign tee shirt, watches nervously from the fringe of the crowd, positioning herself fifty yards from the nearest exit. As 15,000 seats gradually fill up, the decibel level rises, as does the anxiety of the woman in Row 300. She wonders for a moment whether the vibrating arena will contain the intensifying anger the ever more numerous pulsing red beacons all around the place are emitting.

If interpretations of situations make possible and limit our responses to them, then what thousands of rally-goers feel and do next depends on how they filter the event through background understandings from their respective life experiences. An iconic red cap. Countless interpretations based on innumerable life experiences, charged with a range of complex feelings, bringing up various possible actions. The world will react to whatever actions members of the audience initiate, and those reactions will affect how the actors understand, interpret, and act going forward. One possible outcome is joining further campaign events. Another is doing voter registration. Another is disrupting a Democratic rally scheduled soon. Another is red-cap energy surging out from 1,000 arenas, through the MAGA network, into the nation's capitol.

Whatever is honorable in human history from the interpersonal to the international, and whatever brings shame and regret upon us, are made possible and limited by interpretations human beings make grounded in the evolutionary, historical, social, cultural, and personal experience out of which they arise and the actions we take in their light and shadow.<sup>8</sup>

To appreciate the deeper significance of interpretation, consider that only a tiny fraction of the universe is accessible to our experience, and that, only through interpretation. Realizing our tininess in the universe does not diminish the significance of humanity's cosmic role. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson suggests that in humanity, the universe becomes aware of itself.<sup>9</sup> Philosopher Martin Heidegger called *Dasein*—human existence—the clearing in which Being makes appearances.<sup>10</sup> Evolutionary paleontologist and religious thinker Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "My matter is not a part of the universe possessed by me *totaliter*, it is the whole universe possessed by me *partialiter*."<sup>11</sup> Deriving meaning from the mundane to the ultimate is a work performed by humans; we are all doing it every day. Whatever another's nationality, race, religion, or ideology may be, when we meet, my life experiences make possible only a partial understanding of their circumstances, aspirations, interests, and sacred values. Your comprehension of me is likewise possible and limited. The "you" I meet is never complete. It is always my apprehension of you, you-as-perceived-through-my-life-experience-filters. Even the you that you meet and the

I that I meet are self-interpretations. I do not have unmediated knowing of myself and neither do you. Public actors may or may not be paying attention to interpretation, but it is paying attention to them.

There is always more to others and their circumstances than I can perceive. In a favorite throwaway line, talking heads on cable news glibly assert that “perception is reality.” Perception is real, but equating it with reality is anthropocentric narcissism. Perception, like interpretation, is the result of meetings between perceiver/interpreter and perceived/interpreted. Meaning arises not from one side or another, but in between. So also it is with interpretation: real, but not co-extensive with reality.

Seasoned, effective public actors develop the habit of attending to the self- and other-interpretations that drive all processes including negotiation, mediation, and planning for joint action. There are no agreements unmediated by interpretation. We never see things just as they are, but also as we are. This is interpretation, the form of life.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conflicting Interpretations of Race Today**

In thirty years of interracial community organizing and civic leadership as a white person in a majority black city, I have encountered seven groups with different background understandings, interpretations, and habits of action in matters of race.

*White racists*, including the Ku Klux Klan, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and many others off stage, embrace the ideology of white superiority. They believe there is a plot underway to replace white people through the takeover of American institutions. In their minds, “diversity,” “inclusion,” and “equity” are codes for that strategy. This group’s history gave us the demonic, now iconic, chant: “The Jews will not replace us!” and the riot in the nation’s capital on January 6, 2021.

*Black bigots*, like the Nation of Islam’s Minister Louis Farrakhan, publicly declare hatred for the “white devils,” and Jews in particular. In the fever dreams of Farrakhan and his followers, America is marching to a decisive battle that black people must win “by any means necessary.”

White racism and black bigotry are metastasizing in our body politic. Those who demean others and threaten or practice violence against them put themselves outside the pale of human decency and democratic society.

*The minimally engaged* exercise their freedom to deal with social matters like race as they choose, including not at all. They assume this as a right. The downside to this position is first that all but the very wealthy may need fellow citizens one day to help them protect their home’s zoning, increase police presence in their neighborhood, see to it that the trash is picked up, or recover from a hurricane. Second, the engagement of people with one another in the practice of citizenship strengthens virtues like cooperativeness, respect, tolerance, courage, compassion, and practical wisdom. These have great value in many areas of life and cannot be developed individually.

Having been involved in collaboration and confrontation with members of the four following groups for more than thirty years, I find them committed to their ideals while also professing understandings about race that contribute to America’s racial impasse. Like every socially engaged group, their understandings of racial matters are part of the solution and part of the problem.

*Antiracists*, like Black Lives Matter activists and numerous left-wing academics, believe that institutional policies and practices that damage the life chances of people based on skin-color prejudice are the underlying American social problem. They believe that any attempt at social change that does not make identifying and dismantling institutional racism its focus cannot succeed and will, in fact, make things worse. They are correct that the historical movement from chattel

slavery to Jim Crow to segregation to institutional racism created cumulative disadvantages for African Americans that to this day cause suffering and limit their life chances. Their approach to changing the situation of primary concern to them is, however, so ideologically driven and naive politically that it makes them unable to lead or otherwise participate effectively. For example, “leaders” who constantly move group discussion back to their favorite topic—race—are disrespecting those at the table with different primary concerns or other ways of thinking about race. They will not remain for long. Organizations where members will only follow black people, significantly diminish their capacity for impact in the world by leading or participating effectively in significant collaborations on major issues such as poverty, health care, and policing. There is a time to call out racism in public demonstrations and a time to change discriminatory laws and national priorities. These goals require different strategies and tactics, suited to particular contexts. Knowing when to do what is a matter of seasoned political judgment developed only in the public arena. When a group cannot move fluidly and effectively between protest and changing institutional policies and practices, it limits its public action to reacting to the actions of others. The others, of course, welcome that reactivity.

*Individualists* believe that people have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. They are personally responsible for their actions. They have opportunities that they can take up or reject. They hold the view that the good life is free people pursuing, within the boundaries of the law, opportunities afforded everyone in the United States based on their education, reliability, and the quality of their work. They believe that, while additional work remains to be done, the civil rights legislation passed beginning in the 1960s leveled the playing field so that all who are willing to learn and work can compete and win. They believe that labor markets will not pass up needed workers based on skin color. They reject the demands of those who use race as a negotiating tactic as “playing the race card,” which they regard as special pleading often having nothing to do with the situation at hand.

Individualists often fail to recognize that there is no such thing as a self not affected greatly by society. Millions still are born, live, and die having been burdened all their lives with accumulated social and economic disadvantages tied to the color of their skin, despite heroic efforts over 400 years to change that. There is, indeed, such a thing as society, not just individuals externally related in space and time.

*Black separatists*, inspired by twentieth-century pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, are convinced that African Americans must organize to fend for themselves and are foolish to expect anything but self-serving gestures from white people. They stress both economic self-sufficiency and the independence of black institutions because these require each other. When we hear talk of keeping African American assets in the African American economy, we are listening to the separatist voice of black culture.<sup>13</sup>

Separatists are correct that African Americans, like members of any cultural group, need to do the “organic work” of building the economic, political, and civil-society institutions that give them power to decide and act on their interests as they see fit.<sup>14</sup> Nothing required for the well-being of black people has ever been or ever will be the gift of white people. The limitation of the separatist view is that the effects of such things as natural disasters, violent crime waves, and high poverty cannot be effectively managed by any one group on its own. The habit of separatism tends to, but need not, go against participation in coalitions and social action networks. Leaders of groups with this tendency will have to go against the grain of their own customs to join such efforts when the necessity of having allies becomes apparent. Eschewing allies leaves separatist groups with no auxiliary power source.

*Pragmatists* believe that the way forward is not focusing on race or any other historic division, but rather working together for the common good across racial, religious, class, and other lines. Doing things like making public schools work for all children regardless of race or class; fighting the corrupting effects of government waste, fraud, and abuse; and ensuring that police treat members of all groups legally, fairly, and respectfully. The singular strategy of pragmatists is to interrupt and alter destructive histories of inter-group conflict not by talking about them, but by focusing instead on mutual priorities for change and acting collaboratively across racial lines to change them.

Pragmatists are correct that those who are serious about addressing racism and poverty must get busy forming diverse coalitions aimed at changing what race and poverty have wrought, like fixing unconstitutional policing, chronically failing public schools, and under-funded youth recreation programs. A weakness in this approach is that pragmatists' strong desire to get to the work of change leaves them failing to acknowledge how racism continues to harm people of color, including coalition allies. This may alienate potential partners who need some indication that pragmatists 'get' their situation. All pragmatists have to do is listen to allies and make it plain that they hear their concerns.

A bare-bones comparison and contrast of the goals and strategies of these sub-groups lets us identify their "lanes." In a complex, often contradictory, sometimes chaotic public world, developing the discipline of staying in our lanes is basic. Beyond that, actors from two or more lanes—such as pragmatists, individualists, and separatists—can combine talent and power to achieve goals important to all by agreeing to merge lanes to address particular issues on a time-limited basis. This is the flexibility of powerful social action networks.

The last five groups I described bring both capacity and limitation to moving the country forward on race while addressing issues such as public safety, health care, security in old age, and education. For some, that work will likely be in local informal and formal associations; for others, in the corridors of local, state, and national power.

Possible futures for race in the United States are continually forming and reforming in the interaction of the groups above with each other and the larger society. Ongoing differences notwithstanding, even modest gains lower the racial temperature, allowing groups in conflict to re-balance, re-align, and build an infrastructure of public bridges founded on a mutual grasp of others' interests that facilitates joint peacebuilding efforts in the future. Bridges built in classes and workshops on racism and white guilt cannot match the enduring strength of those constructed with allies in the public arena as they pursue common goods.

The equilibrium of this polycentric "network of networks" called "race" is dynamic. Its present pattern will be disrupted whenever one of a million straws next breaks the camel's back. For a local example, one charter member organization of a coalition focused on violent crime reduction fails to keep a commitment to take part in a meeting with the mayor. As a result, an important goal will not be met and trust will suffer, at least temporarily, slowing development of organizational effectiveness. On a national scale, cell phone videos of cops beating traffic offenders pleading with their hands up send waves of negative emotions surging through the national web of relations and every now and then it erupts.

## **Antiracism: How Background Understandings Divide Us**

Because understandings from societal and personal experience make possible and limit interpretations and actions, I will take a critical look at the background understandings of the philosophy called "antiracism." The following brief interactions take us to their center.



Q: Are you an antiracist?

A: I reject racism.

Q: Are you an antiracist?

A: No.

R: Then you are a racist.

Q: Are you an antiracist?

A: Our coalition played a critical role in reducing the number of nonviolent prisoners, mostly black, by 8,000.

Q: Are you antiracist?

A: No.

R: Then you are a racist.

Q: Are you an antiracist?

A1: My group monitors and reports on police use of force.

A2: All my work in the city is intentionally done across racial lines.

A3: I support black economic autonomy.

A4: I am a violence interrupter in an urban killing field.

A5: We focus on what we're for, not what we're against.

A6: I reject every form of prejudice.

A7: I lead a diverse public school that embraces and respects every child.

A8: My agency protects children in poverty at high risk of violence and abuse at home.

A9: My mission is to challenge environmental racism in court.

A10: I defend African American juveniles charged with violent crime pro bono.

Q: Are you antiracists?

A: No.

R: Then all of you are racists.

What is happening here? In each case, a person responds to the question “Are you an antiracist?” by naming a personal commitment they make to challenging racism and its effects. Each answers, in effect, “I am against racism, but I don’t choose to identify myself as an antiracist.” The recurring response is, “Then you are a racist.” What might be the basis for this assertion? In a book currently influential with some on the left entitled *How to Be an Antiracist*, Professor Ibram Kendi defines an “antiracist” as “one who is expressing an idea of racial equality, or is actively supporting a policy that leads to racial equity and justice.”<sup>15</sup> This leads to the inference that anyone doing something else is a racist. As puzzling as it is to grasp, in the thought world of antiracism, being against racism is but another way of being racist. This seems to mean either that working to identify and undo racist policies is the only action that takes someone out of the “racist” category, or that all public work is actually about racial equity, whether we know it or not.

We can find the meaning of “if you are not an antiracist, you are a racist” by paying attention to what form of language it is. First, it is a dogmatic statement. This is a simple linguistic characterization, not a criticism. Dogmatic pronouncements preempt questions and refuse to engage in open deliberation. Their form is unilateral. People in closed groups recite dogmas to each other, reinforcing orthodoxy.

Second, the statement is also a fallacy, an invalid conclusion based on erroneous reasoning. Kendi’s fallacy has many names: the “false dichotomy,” “either/or,” “false binary,” or “dualistic” fallacies. The faulty reasoning behind dogmatic, dualistic antiracism is twofold. It reduces the

unfathomable complexity and plurality of human societies, arising from and transformed in history, to a single dichotomy, and it presses people to choose between the two sides, often by manipulating guilt on essentially moral grounds: antiracist/good, racist/bad. Antiracist dogma says “you have to choose from the racist vs. antiracist pair and one side is bad.” In fact, things in the universe that can be singled out and looked at in pairs are endless. Why choose this one? Is it a random, arbitrary, or political choice?

For antiracists, people working to free African Americans from prisons remain racists unless they adopt the title “antiracist.” Dogmatic statements allow true believers to self-identify as insiders and protect themselves separately from outsiders. “If you are not an antiracist you are a racist” defines an ingroup and, by implication, its outgroup. “If you’re not with me (not an antiracist), you’re against me (a racist). I have friends (antiracists) and enemies (racists) but no acquaintances (people against racism, but not antiracists).” This is how people think, talk, and act in closed systems.

Having interacted with antiracist educators and organizers for many years, my principal critique is their mono-focus on the dogmatic fallacy of antiracism. As we have seen, someone who asserts, “If you are not an antiracist, then you are a racist,” is promulgating a dogmatic fallacy about race and what must be done about it. If they succeed in selling it, numberless potential allies who are already demonstrably against racism, will take their political and ethical capital elsewhere. Crying “Racist!” about specific situations that harm black people today such as discrimination in housing and hiring, failures of city services, and constitutional policing causes them regularly to alienate potential allies by insisting that the antiracist way is the valid way forward on race and that anyone who does not get that is naive, racist, or both.

If an antiracist offers you the dogmatic fallacy to use as a social compass, think for yourself before accepting. What I know for myself from thirty years of interracial and interfaith community organizing is that there are millions of people who show by their everyday actions that they are against racism, but reject the “antiracist” label and methods. No fallacious dogma will erase them and it is disrespectful to try.

A fundamental standard in Western science is that for theories to be judged valid and reliable by the scientific community, they must be repeatedly tested publicly against facts. Antiracist thought evidences no interest that paradigm, instead treating truth as politically correct assertions with no recognizable interest in the community of scientific discourse, including on race.

According to antiracists, all effective organizing for change begins with consciousness-raising for racists, but experience has shown me that no amount of consciousness-raising can replace diverse groups of organized actors with credible action plans for substantive, sustainable change. In fact, immersion in the concepts of antiracism typically damages the capacity to act. All the antiracist organizing in the world will not bring about constitutional policing in the US. The lift is too heavy and the available antiracist power too light.

Multiply the shortfall of organized antiracist political power by a hundred other issues connected to race—such as infant mortality, maternal death rates, cardiac disease, youth murders, unconstitutional policing, drug and alcohol, family dysfunction, childhood poverty, teen pregnancy, failing schools, and over-incarceration—and the extent of antiracism’s power shortage for public organizing becomes clear. The cult-like tent of antiracist ideas is simply too small to hold the people power necessary to make serious change. This deficit of people-power only gets worse when antiracist evangelizing teams go out into the world bearing the news that “if you are not antiracist, you are a racist.” This will not lead to long lines at the sign-up tables outside the tent

entrance. This power disconnect is a challenge to people who repeatedly and rightly demand that race-related issues be addressed.

Training to undo racism or “white fragility” seminars are costly and counterproductive to building action-oriented coalitions. The cost I have in mind is not the price of admission to such events, but rather the cost, in social trust, of formulaic language quick to derogate others who do not embrace the concepts of antiracism. Relationships built in these classes and workshops cannot match those formed in pursuing common, public goods. Listening to understand what motivates African American and white partners to join bi-racial coalitions is far less likely to create further divisions and media controversy than any training focused on race. In my experience, talking about race is more constructive when it occurs before, during, or after acting together in public. People who have been in the arena together often develop a shared understanding not just of public life as a whole, but of specific issues like race in particular. Black and white people who have had the experience of having each other’s backs in the process of standing together in public for an agreed agenda, regularly come to know each other beyond normal, polite racial distance and certainly beyond those who have shared a workshop on race.

I carry a vivid memory of an interracial organizing meeting in a New Orleans church basement where people were listening in dyads to each other’s primary concerns. My partner, an elderly African American woman called Barbara said, “Dr. Cowan, I am so tired of white people expecting me to explain what it’s like to be black in New Orleans. I came to this meeting because the toilets in my granddaughter’s school don’t work right. That’s what I’m here to talk about.” When people of different racial and religious groups doing public work together speak plainly to each other and listen to understand, public work gets done and prejudices are whittled away, not by artificial “courageous conversations,” but rather by real public actions by groups of citizens.

People engaging each other with respect and honesty as they pursue the common good together is the most powerful alternative to the cultural habits of avoiding race and arguing about it. If you want to try erasing racial barriers, gather a diverse group of people and make it your business to see whether those responsible have provided sanitary, functional toilets for granddaughters like Ms. Barbara’s, in public schools in your community. If that proves to be good, the next thing will arise from the first.

The antiracist movement has a problem. On the one hand, they want to remain publicly committed their core values and ideas; on the other, they want to do something significant and grow membership or find allies.

Imagine two groups wanting to organize around racial issues, one non-antiracist and one not. If the collaboration does not work, in my experience there are three possibilities: the antiracists leave and the organization continues, needing some recovery time; the non-antiracists leave and the organization dies; or the non-antiracists and antiracists lock up in a power struggle and the organization dies. I lived at that crossroads of this struggle for several years and in the end the organization in which I had invested countless hours over seven years failed. One factor in the Jeremiah Group’s demise was my failure to understand and call out antiracism in our leadership group.

The major changes that America needs for example cannot be effected by a small group of radicals who believe that the most important thing they must do is explain to potential allies that, whether they have any serious engagement with race or not, the most important thing about them is that they are either antiracists or racists. In my experience, people will not be back for further enlightenment after that encounter and many will seek other paths to engagement. Why? Because dogmatic fallacies are only persuasive to true believers in a cause, who by definition are open

neither to logic nor social science. They already know with certainty everything important and project that attitude to others at the table.<sup>16</sup>

## **Aspiring Together**

As I consider ways forward on the complex matter of race at the end of our exploration of the collective practice of race in the US today, it seems to me that something is needed to raise our horizon above the chronic attacking and avoiding that race provokes, to a vision with the aspirational power to pull us through tides of anxiety and despair and urge us on to concrete transformations.

I find such power in the life and words of Publius Terentius Afer. He was a Phoenician, born about the year 200 BCE in the North African city of Carthage. His household was on the losing side of Rome's second Punic War with Carthage. A Roman senator, an elite among the victors, took him to his home and provided for his Latin education. At a young age he became recognized as one of the greatest writers of Latin comedies. He is referred to by historians as an "African Roman" playwright. 'African' and 'Roman' are names for two cultural worlds, two sets of background understandings that make possible and limit one's interpretations and actions. As an African Roman playwright, Publius embraced two worlds. He saw the world as through bicultural binoculars. We can hear this two-ness in his middle and surnames "Terentius," the senator who gave him his name and brought him into the world that was Rome, and "Afer," his home continent.

Out of his artistic internalization of Carthage and Rome, powerful words arose and engage us nearly two millennia later: "Nothing human can be alien to me."<sup>17</sup> I find no dogma in them, nor anything fallacious, nor arrogant, nor ethnocentric, nor divisive, nor combative, only a deeply moving appeal to our better angels. His statement does not name an inevitability, but rather a possibility to which we may aspire. Reducing the distance between our group and others through civility and collaboration regarding shared concerns and sacred values that affect everyone's lives, is surely an aspiration worthy of the steadfast commitment of human beings at all times, and especially in an era of public life when incessant attack and habitual avoidance can only send us spiraling further downward.<sup>18</sup>

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice*, with Michael A. Cowan (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), chapters 8, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Ethical Demands of Integration," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 118.

<sup>4</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little Brown, 1996), 389.

<sup>5</sup> Shemuel ben Nachmani, Talmud, Tractate Berakhot (55B).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>8</sup> John Arthos, *Speaking Hermeneutically: Understanding in the Conduct of a Life* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), introduction and afterword.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 401–3.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 171.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Conflict of Interpretations: Debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 216–23.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Cowan, “Beyond Single Interests: Broad-Based Community Organizing as a Vehicle for Promoting Adult Literacy,” in *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, vol. 6, ed. John Comings, Barbara Garner, and Cristine Smith (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 241–43, 245–50, 253–59; Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (New York: Continuum, 2007), chapter 15.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 2–3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 15–26.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), chapter 16.

<sup>17</sup> Publius Terentius Afer, *The Self-Tormenter*, in *Terence: The Comedies*, trans. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), act 1, scene 1, line 25.