

ROSS DOUTHAT

The Excesses of Antiracist Education

July 3, 2021



By Ross Douthat
Opinion Columnist

In my last column I tried to describe part of the current controversy over race and K-12 education — the part that turns on whether it’s possible to tell a fuller historical story about slavery and segregation while also retaining a broadly patriotic understanding of America’s founding and development.

In this column I will try to describe the part of the controversy that concerns how we teach about racism today. It’s probably the more intense debate, driving both progressive zeal and conservative backlash.

Again, I want to start with what the new progressivism is interested in changing. One change involves increasingly familiar terms like “structural” and “systemic” racism, and the attempt to teach about race in a way that emphasizes not just explicitly racist laws and attitudes, but also how America’s racist past still influences inequalities today.

In theory, this shift is supposed to enable debates that avoid using “racist” as a personal accusation — since the point is that a culture can sustain persistent racial inequalities even if most white people *aren’t* bigoted or biased.

Still, this kind of vision would, on its own, face inevitable conservative resistance on several grounds: that it overstates the challenges facing minorities in America today; that it seems to de-emphasize personal responsibility; that it implies policy responses (racial quotas, reparations) that are racially discriminatory, arguably unconstitutional and definitely threatening to the white middle class.

But the basic claim that structural racism *exists* has strong evidence behind it, and the idea that schools should teach about it in some way is probably a winning argument for progressives. (Almost half of college Republicans, in a recent poll, supported teaching about how “patterns of racism are ingrained in law and other institutions.”) Especially

since not every application of the structural-racist diagnosis implies left-wing policy conclusions: The pro-life and school choice movements, for instance, regularly invoke the impact of past progressive racism on disproportionately high African-American abortion rates and underperforming public schools.

What's really inflaming today's fights, though, is that the structural-racist diagnosis isn't being offered on its own. Instead it's yoked to two sweeping theories about how to fight the problem it describes.

First, there is a novel theory of moral education, according to which the best way to deal with systemic inequality is to confront its white beneficiaries with their privileges and encourage them to wrestle with their sins.

Second, there is a Manichaeian vision of public policy, in which all policymaking is either racist or antiracist, all racial disparities are the result of racism — and the measurement of any outcome short of perfect “equity” may be a form of structural racism itself.

The first idea is associated with Robin DiAngelo, the second with Ibram X. Kendi, and they converge in places like the work of Tema Okun, whose presentations train educators to see “white-supremacy culture” at work in traditional measures of academic attainment.

The impulses these ideas encourage take different forms in different institutions, but they usually circle around to similar goals. First, the attempt to use racial-education programs to construct a stronger sense of shared white identity, on the apparent theory that making Americans of European ancestry think of themselves as defined by a toxic “whiteness” will lead to its purgation. Second, the deconstruction of standards that manifest racial disparities, on the apparent theory that if we stop using gifted courses or standardized tests, the inequities they reveal will cease to matter.

These goals, it should be stressed, don't follow necessarily from the theory of structural racism. The first idea arguably betrays the theory's key insight, that you can have “racism without racists,” by deliberately trying to increase individual racial guilt. The second extends structural analysis beyond what it can reasonably bear, into territory where white supremacy supposedly explains Asian American success on the SAT.

But precisely because they don't follow from modest and defensible conceptions of systemic racism, smart progressives in the media often retreat to those modest conceptions when challenged by conservatives — without acknowledging that the dubious conceptions are a big part of what's been amplifying controversy, and conjuring up dubious Republican legislation in response.

Here one could say that figures like Kendi and DiAngelo, and the complex of foundations and bureaucracies that have embraced the new antiracism, increasingly play a similar role to talk radio in the Republican coalition. They represent an ideological extremism that embarrasses clever liberals, as the spirit of Limbaugh often embarrassed right-wing

intellectuals. But this embarrassment encourages a pretense that their influence is modest, their excesses forgivable, and the real problem is always the evils of the other side.

That pretense worked out badly for the right, whose intelligentsia awoke in 2016 to discover that they no longer recognized their own coalition. It would be helpful if liberals currently dismissing anxiety over Kendian or DiAngelan ideas as just a “moral panic” experienced a similar awakening now — before progressivism simply becomes its excesses, and the way back to sanity is closed.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTOpinion) and Instagram.