

Book Review

White Fragility: Why It's so Hard to Talk to White People about Racism

by Robin DiAngelo

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DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard to Talk to White People about Racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018.

Introduction

White Fragility: Why It's so Hard to Talk to White People about Racism by Robin DiAngelo, was published by Beacon Press in 2018 has 186 pages. DiAngelo is a popular speaker and consultant at universities, corporations, and government institutions on racial and social justice. Her book, *White Fragility*, contains much of the information used in training seminars for companies like Coca-Cola to help build an inclusive workplace. It is a *New York Times* bestseller, and it has been translated into multiple languages.

Summary

“Original Sin” is how the writer to the foreword kicks off the book’s discussion on race and racism in America.¹ DiAngelo explains that this nation’s original sin was white male oppression, including “the attempted genocide of Indigenous people and the theft of their land.”² She adds that different groups of people, including women and enslaved Africans, have been treated unequally despite the founding principle “that all people are created equal.”³ Furthermore, she believes that the U.S. has not yet achieved its “founding principle,” and every gain so far has “come through identity politics.”⁴ In other words, civil rights gains are the result of our “focus on the barriers specific groups face in their struggle for equality.”⁵

¹ Robin. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard to Talk to White People about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), ix.

² Ibid., xiii.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The reason for our failure to reach these goals is that the system itself is flawed. Western Civilization was built to favor white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied people and disadvantage anyone outside those supposed norms.⁶ Consequently, the United States developed *systems* of oppression meant to “maintain inequality” and keep white people at the top of this hierarchical structure because of their whiteness.⁷

Therefore, DiAngelo argues *against* American principles of “democracy as a political system,” “capitalism as an economic system,” “individualism,” (treating people as individuals and not groups), and “meritocracy (anyone can succeed if he or she works hard).”⁸ The reason so many whites cannot see these as systems of racism and inequality is because of Western “cultural frameworks.”⁹ White people are looking through faulty Western lenses that distort reality. The “two key Western ideologies” responsible for this poor vision are “individualism and objectivity.”¹⁰

Furthermore, white people are “too fragile,” white ears are “too sensitive,” and “white souls too fragile” to recognize their white privilege and racism.¹¹ Consequently, at least at first, white people often respond with one of three defensive reactions. They are argumentative, silent, or they simply walk away.¹² Even progressives are sometimes guilty of thinking they have already arrived; however, fighting racism and oppression is something that white people must

⁶ Ibid., vii, 40.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9, 86.

¹¹ Ibid., x, 22, 24, 145

¹² Ibid., 2, 4, 101

continue to work at, less we “reinstate white racial equilibrium.”¹³ White people will always be white and oppressive, but we can work at being “less white” and “less racially oppressive.”¹⁴

DiAngelo concludes the book with examples of her own racist indiscretions against someone of color. She confessed the racism that she personally perpetrated against a colleague.¹⁵ Then she apologized for her racist actions.¹⁶ Like all other white people, DiAngelo has to fight her white fragility, white privilege, and white racism; she confesses that she will never be “free of racism” because it is a “lifelong process.”¹⁷

Critique

Robin DiAngelo, in *White Fragility*, is to be commended for her honesty when she admits that she does not “attempt to *prove* that racism exists,” instead she “*start[s]* from *that premise*” (*emphasis added*).¹⁸ Likewise, she *assumes, not proves*, that all adverse reactions to her premise are based on white fragility. There are no exceptions. Any disagreement or silence to her premises are acts of racism themselves.¹⁹

It is hard to lose an argument when starting with the premises you intend to prove. But it is impossible to lose an argument when all disagreements only prove you are right. However, there are yet other ways that DiAngelo seeks to unlevel the playing field against those who reject her opinions. She not only starts with her premise and disallows all opposing arguments, but she also redefines multiple terms in ways that force agreement.

¹³ Ibid., 101, 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹⁵ Ibid., 140.

¹⁶ Ibid., 140-141, 145.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87, 140, 147.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 103.

For example, she redefines objectivism: “Objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias.”²⁰ That is a strawman argument against objectivity. Christians agree with DiAngelo that everyone is susceptible to biases, but each of us should seek “objectivity through repression of one’s biases.”²¹ Additionally, DiAngelo contends that white people are less objective than people of color (POC) because “all perspectives are *not* equally valid.”²² Essentially, she argues that because white people are racist, they cannot see racism and must be shown where it exists by POC.²³ This claim is another extremely circular argument. Paradoxically, as a *white* woman, she gets paid lots of money to help white people see their racism.²⁴

However, racism is another word that she redefines to make her point. According to DiAngelo, racism is a system, not an event; consequently, racism is not “an intentional [act] of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals.”²⁵ Therefore, white people can relax and “breathe” because she is not calling them “bad people.”²⁶ Despite her claim that calling someone a racist is not a “moral judgment,” she seemingly unintentionally eventually concedes that *it is* when she *confesses* and *apologizes* for *her* immoral, *racist acts* against a co-worker.²⁷

This type of doublespeak is especially despicable when DiAngelo describes “[w]hite fragility” as a “form of bullying.”²⁸ Somehow, refusing to give in to the bullying techniques of

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

²¹ Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 6, no. 1 (1995): 85.

²² DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 127.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 73.

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶ Ibid., 13, 71.

²⁷ Ibid., 13, 71, 133, 145.

²⁸ Ibid., 112.

DiAngelo and other Woke *bullies* who try to cancel everyone who disagrees with them is an act committed by white *bullies* who do not want to be *bullied*.²⁹ As I was writing this critique, a news story had just come out about a group of educators in Loudoun County, Virginia.³⁰ These self-professed anti-racists (a term DiAngelo uses of herself) have compiled a list of parents suspected of disagreeing with DiAngelo's racial concepts to "silence" and "expose" them.³¹ That *is* bullying.

Furthermore, like DiAngelo, these anti-racists are not satisfied with *silencing* those who reject their views on racism because included on the list of problematic parents are those who simply wanted to be *neutral*.³² DiAngelo writes that "my silence is not benign" (it is not good; hence, it is morally wrong) "because it protects and maintains the racial hierarchy."³³ Therefore, she intentionally refers to anyone who remains silent or disagrees with her as a *bully* to *shame them* into agreeing with her (i.e., she *bullies* them).³⁴

DiAngelo not only redefines words and turns concepts like bullying upside down, but she is also dishonest. She constantly refers to former President Trump as a racist because he said that there were "very fine people on both sides."³⁵ Trump was not referring to White Supremacists and BLM organizers. No, the two sides the president was referring to were the people who wanted to protect the historicity of the confederate statues and those who wanted them removed.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Luke Rosiak, "Teachers Compile List of Parents Who Question Racial Curriculum, Plot War on Them," The Daily Wire, March 16, 2021, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/loudoun-teachers-target-parents-critical-race-theory-hacking>

³¹ Ibid., paragraph 1 and 24.

³² Ibid., paragraph 1 and 22.

³³ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 58.

³⁴ Ibid., 112.

³⁵ Ibid., 40.

Nonetheless, that is the narrative that DiAngelo uses to call Trump a racist. Likewise, she uses the media's false portrayal of Michael Brown being an *innocent unarmed* black man shot down by police in Ferguson.³⁶ This narrative continues even though a black DOJ, under a black president, using black and bi-racial witnesses, found no evidence of any wrongdoing by the police officer.³⁷

She also claims that today's academic liberal institutions are *against* promoting classes based on ethnicity. She describes the struggle for required university diversity courses that focus *not* on talent, but the authors' ethnicity, as a hard-won fight against a white majority.³⁸ However, Shelby Steele, a black conservative, describes just the opposite in his book, *White Guilt*. Despite his objections, Steele, a black professor, virtually stood alone against *white academic elitists* when they created such a class.³⁹ Furthermore, DiAngelo is not satisfied with courses that only study POC authors; they must also discuss and teach her version of racism (and remember, DiAngelo is white).⁴⁰ In other words, they cannot have any white authors, and they should teach that all white people are racists.⁴¹ Additionally, they must instill in all students that America is an inherently racist country that still oppresses all black people.⁴²

³⁶ Ibid., 96.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Justice. "Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri Police Officer Darren Wilson," Washington, DC: Department of Justice, accessed on March 14, 2021, at https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/pressreleases/attachments/2015/03/04/doj_report_on_shooting_of_michael_brown_1.pdf

³⁸ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 8.

³⁹ Shelby Steele, *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2007), 155-159.

⁴⁰ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., 149.

⁴² Ibid.

Nonetheless, a few gold nuggets are in the book, but they are not on purpose. Although DiAngelo gives all the credit for civil rights gains to identity politics and calls individualism the problem, she illustrates the opposite on several occasions.⁴³ For example, she mentions Ruby Bridges and describes how white America saw this little girl getting screamed at “in photos and on television.”⁴⁴ However, she misses the point. When America saw little Ruby on television, they saw a person, a little girl, just like any other girl. They saw her humanity and could no longer look at her as part of a completely separate group. Viewing black people as *individual human beings* and not as an inferior identity group woke this country up and finally brought about change.

Interestingly enough, DiAngelo describes the same thing in her own life. She talks about her black friends, who she loves deeply, not because of their blackness, but because DiAngelo sees their *humanity* when she is with them.⁴⁵ These feelings are different than the feelings she has when she “conceptualize[s] black people in general.”⁴⁶ Even though she is unaware of it, DiAngelo has described the answer to racism. We need to see and treat each other as individuals, not as groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *White Fragility* may get some things right; however, a broken clock is right twice a day. Nevertheless, just as a broken clock is not a good tool for telling time, DiAngelo’s book is not a good tool for discussing racism. She uses flawed logic, rejects open

⁴³ Ibid., xii.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

dialogue, and tries to bully anyone who disagrees with her into submission. Furthermore, dividing people into opposing groups is *only* suitable for creating more opposition.

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