

# Book Review: Innovatively Stretching Marxism - Arun Kundnani - What Is Racism and Anti-racism?

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**WHAT IS ANTI-RACISM? And Why It Means Anti-capitalism** outlines a radical understanding of racism by discussing the works of several important theorists, writers and educators. The author identifies two dueling stories about racism's origins and reproduction, but while he considers one unlocking its mysteries, he finds the other a diversion.

**What Is Anti-racism? And Why It Means Anti-capitalism**, by Arun Kundnani, Verso Books, 2023, \$24.95 paper.

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Arun Kundnani is former editor of *Race and Class*, the magazine of the Institute of Race Relations in Great Britain, a think tank focused on racism and imperialism. He is also a longtime activist in antiracist movements in Britain and the United States. As the author of *The Muslims Are Coming! Spooked* and *The End of Tolerance*, Kundnani writes as a passionate antiracist.

In *What Is Anti-racism?* Kundnani examines both the liberal and liberatory theories of how societies categorize people as "inferior" because of some shared, observable difference.

The liberal theory confronts racist ideology with the goal of teaching people how to locate and eliminate hidden biases and fears.

Kundnani identifies Magnus Hirschfeld, an opponent of the Nazis, as the first to use the word "racism" to identify these unscientific beliefs. In *Rassismus (Racism)*, Hirschfeld, a radical psychiatrist who was both Jewish and gay, traced unscientific assumptions of ethnicity/skin color from the dawn of Enlightenment to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exposing them as irrational.



*Arun Kundnani*

Hirschfeld and his work were branded by the Nazis as degenerate. The Institute of Sexual Science he founded was shut, its 10,000 books burned, and he fled into exile. In the face of this shattering reality, Hirschfeld saw racism as a doctrine one could either believe or not so he proposed an educational program that could teach people to overcome these crude biases.

Shortly after the publication of *Rassismus*, U.S. anthropologists Franz Boas and his student Ruth Benedict introduced the word “racism” to the U.S. public. Benedict’s *Race: Science and Politics* (1940) defined racism as “...the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority.” (35)

Kundnani sees as important Benedict’s grouping together three issues that had previously been seen as separate: the treatment in the United States of Black descendants of slavery, the treatment of Jews in Europe, and the treatment by Western colonialism of the peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas and Caribbean. Benedict noted how the irrational arguments to justify oppression were similar.

Kundnani points out that these insights were diluted by the U.S. government’s campaign to counterpose the Nazi ideology of superiority by a celebration of supposed U.S. diversity. Despite having a segregated army throughout the war, Washington portrayed the country as inclusive and democratic.

If the 1944 publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944) revealed the gap between the reality of the Jim Crow era and the projection of American egalitarianism, racism was a fundamental contradiction that needed to be resolved. Once again, the assumption was that egalitarian values would triumph through education.

## **Racism and Empire**

Recognizing this flurry of writings as a response to the growth of fascism in Germany, Kundnani goes to what he sees as the heart of the matter, quoting C.L.R. James:

*“There is no form of racial discrimination practiced by the Nazis against the Jews that is not practiced by the Europeans in Kenya against the Africans.”* (66)

As Kundnani also notes, Aimé Césaire concluded that Nazi racial ideology was the result of studying and applying the lessons employed in Europe’s far-flung colonies and in the U.S. South.

Hitler’s crimes are only unique, declared Césaire, in that he applied colonial procedures previously applied to only non-Europeans. (75) Césaire, like James, saw racism rooted in colonial dominance. That perspective is the bedrock of *What is Anti-racism?*

Kundnani examines the work of several theorists and activists who came or borrowed from a Marxist tradition. These include W.E.B. DuBois, Lenin, M.N. Roy, C.L.R. James, Claudia Jones, Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Stuart Hall, Cedric Robinson and A. Sivanandan. All find racism related to class exploitation, but with its own dynamic.

Kundnani begins with anticolonial activist Anton de Kom. He describes de Kom's 1934 book *We Slaves of Suriname* "a landmark work of Caribbean anticolonial literature." (9)

De Kom recounts how school taught him "that a Negro must always and unconditionally be the inferior of any white." While the Dutch abolished slavery before his birth, de Kom outlined how plantation system slavery didn't end but continued in new and repressive forms.

After organizing a demonstration of Black and Asian workers at the governor's office, de Kom was arrested, imprisoned and later exiled — ultimately dying from tuberculosis in a German concentration camp.

De Kom's analysis permeates Kundnani's book as other figures step forward to analyze racism, concluding with an emphasis on how it can be extinguished. While highlighting these figures, the chapters include historical background, beginning in 1400, when India and China were the two richest countries in the world. Given their high manufacturing capacity, they established and maintained profitable trade routes.

Even in the early 1800s Bengal's textile industry employed a million workers and dominated the world market. But Britain and other European powers were able to combine the plunder extracted from their American colonies with their military might to build up their trade routes and eventually destroy its textile industry. As Kundnani points out, "Contrary to the myth that colonialism brought modernity to a preindustrial society, Britain's Industrial Revolution depended on India's industrial decline." (45)

Key to colonialism is the subjugation of the people and its land to the "mother" country, fostering "an uneven and unbalanced capitalism." (46) The process of brutal conquest becomes normalized through stoking ethnic and cultural differences. Kundnani makes clear that the British government (and the French as well!) mastered the art of privileging one caste or ethnic group over another to maintain its own dominance. Colonialism leads to famine, plagues, sexual violence, surveillance, repression and impoverishment.

## **Racism Is Structural**

In revealing how colonialism cements racism, Kundnani is driven to investigate how its poison can be eradicated. For Kundnani and the writers he discusses, racism is structural.

He commends Marx and Engels with identifying the working class as the revolutionary agent capable of overthrowing capitalism in the industrialized countries. Yet what is the answer for the colonial world, where the majority of the world's population lives?

Were the masses to wait until the industrial proletariat made revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries, or should they submerge their needs to their own incipient capitalists in the struggle against colonialism?

Those possibilities leave bonded labor and peasants off the historical map. They may not even dismantle racism embedded in the industrial heartlands.

While Kundnani acknowledges that Marx grapples unevenly with colonial questions, he doesn't take

the time to delve into Marx's partial answers in the case of Ireland, India, Russia or the United States but moves on to a 1907 debate in the Second International.

The Stuttgart Congress passed a resolution that "the civilizing mission claimed by capitalist society is only used as a pretext to cover its thirst for exploitation and conquest." However, the vote was close. As a Congress delegate, Lenin was disturbed by the discussion, in which Eduard Bernstein, a leading German Social Democrat, remarked that "a certain tutelage of the civilized peoples of the uncivilized peoples is a necessity." [On this question see Wiliam Smaldone's review of *Reform, Revolution, and Opportunism. Debates in the Second International, 1900-1910* in our previous issue, ATC 229 —ed.]

## **Self-Determination and Anti-Capitalism**

As Lenin began to examine what he described as "colonial chauvinism," he concluded that capitalists in some countries made greater profits from the colonies than from internal production. This, then, provided a material and economic basis for infecting workers in those countries with that chauvinism. (56-57)

In his support for the right of nations to self-determination, Lenin concluded that a struggle led by bourgeois forces such as the Indian National Congress could overthrow European rule. But, given their composition, they would be disinterested in dismantling hierarchies. Exploitation would continue, at least until an independent nation with political and civil rights provided the basis for the development of the working-class leadership necessary to overthrow capitalism.

In the meantime, Lenin concluded, socialists should support anticolonial struggles, particularly aiding workers in the united coalition. He maintained the fight for national liberation, despite limitations, would weaken capitalism. Kundnani remarks:

*"For Lenin, national oppression, including anti-Semitism and white supremacy, was an area of struggle that was separate from but related to class exploitation. National oppression was not simply a reflection of class struggle — it had its own autonomous dynamic. But it was also bound up with class struggles in various ways."* (59)

Kundnani discusses how, during the 1920 Communist International discussion, M.N. Roy challenged Lenin's assumption about how the national liberation struggle could proceed. He offered his experiences as a revolutionary in India, the United States and Mexico.

Roy concluded that in the aftermath of the 1910 Mexican revolution peasants were more advanced politically than European workers. Kundnani writes:

*"[Roy] thought East and West would be joint leading actors on the world stage. Revolutionary workers in the colonizing nations needed to act in concert with revolutionary workers and peasants in the colonized nations. 'These two forces must be coordinated if the final success of the world revolution is to be guaranteed....'"* (62)

Over the course of the discussion, Lenin's original view of the necessity of a two-stage revolutionary process in the colonial world was ditched for one that viewed an interrelationship between anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles. As a result, the "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" concluded that revolution was not only possible in industrialized countries, but in those that Europe had underdeveloped.

Kundnani unfortunately doesn't explore the discussion among Russian revolutionaries before 1917.

While socialists agreed that in despotic Russia there was the need for a “bourgeois-democratic” revolution, three theories emerged.

The Mensheviks envisioned that bourgeois forces would take power, thereby opening up a prolonged period of democratic rights in which the pre-conditions for a socialist revolution would develop. Under Lenin’s leadership the Bolsheviks developed the slogan of “the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry,” an ambiguous formulation — what force was to lead the revolution?

Trotsky had a third viewpoint: since the bourgeois was too weak, corrupt and cowardly to resist imperialism, the revolution would be led by the workers in alliance with the urban and rural masses. While this alliance would carry out democratic tasks, of necessity it would be forced to take more radical measures. This revolutionary process, known as the theory of “permanent revolution,” would eventually require an extension of the revolution to Western Europe where the workers’ movement was strong.

Following World War I and the Russian Revolution, the debate was resolved and codified by the 1920 Comintern “Theses.” In addition to the models of the 1789 French “bourgeois” revolution and the 1917 socialist revolution, Kundnani notes that the Haitian Revolution illuminates that understanding.

### **A Third Revolutionary Model**

C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1938) is a study of the Haitian Revolution (1789-1803), the world’s sole successful slave rebellion. He reveals how its oppressive system of plantation slavery was held “in subjection by associating inferiority and degradation with the most obvious distinguishing mark of the slave — the black skin.” The wealthy owners were men of business concerned with maintaining their profits and power.

For James, racism is not a set of beliefs but “social rules and policies” that enable exploitation. It was the effect of the structure, not its cause. That is, James saw racist prejudice as a *dependent variable*, not as the primary force. (65, 68)

James concluded it is not mere prejudice that allows these plantation owners to terrorize and dehumanize their work force, but that if the work is to be profitable, slaves need to be coerced and denied their humanity. He pointed out that the social order dehumanizes the slave population. This recalls de Kom’s learning to see himself as coming from inferior stock.

But while slaves taken from Africa were treated as inferior, their remembrance of a pre-capture world enabled them to construct an alternate narrative. This culture, forged from the need to maintain a collective humanity in the face of degradation, allowed Haitian slaves a vision of freedom that sustained their collective resistance. Kundnani notes that this revolutionary process parallels W.E.B. DuBois’ account of the “general strike” Black slaves waged against Confederate slavemasters. Through that struggle they not only won their liberation but provided the decisive element to win the Civil War.

In taking their freedom, Haitians were part of a common front against the French aristocracy. As such they were able to construct ties with French Jacobins. But as the counterrevolution descended in France, that alliance was broken — and the Black Jacobians were forced to go it alone.

The model of the Haitian revolution is inspiring, yet it also provides a cautionary tale. The cooperation between the oppressed masses and the French Jacobins was broken. While Kundnani doesn’t stress the price the Haitians paid, the country was boycotted and forced to pay 150 million

French francs as an indemnity over property claims. This debt took the nation over a century to repay and is partially responsible for Haiti being a destitute and dysfunctional country today.

Kundnani briefly recounts C.L.R. James' years in the United States, where as a leading member of the SWP, he drafted their 1939 resolution on the Black struggle. James asserted that the Black movement was more than a workers' struggle but had a vitality of its own. Kundnani concludes this was not a Black nationalist argument but one where James saw "the struggle for socialism and the struggle against racism as passing through the other." (72)

As Kundnani moves into a discussion of the post-World War II era of successful colonial revolutions, he adds to his toolbox Aimé Césaire's analysis of how colonizers impose violence on colonized subjects.

In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire points out that to ease the colonists' conscience after their brutality, they frequently describe those they have colonized as "animals." But in doing so, the colonizer becomes an animal. Césaire makes the point that "The system made the racist, not the other way around." (75)

Further, for both Césaire and his student Frantz Fanon, violence is necessary to conquer and maintain dominance over others. However, it results in poisoning the entire society. Although Hirschfeld didn't draw this conclusion from his psychological examinations of German soldiers troubled by their African experience of driving the Herero people into the Kahari Desert where eighty percent died, Fanon did. His clinic in Algeria treated both the tortured and torturer.

Fanon saw the need to use Marx's tools to examine colonialism while working to "slightly stretch" the resulting analysis. If Marx and Engels found the industrial proletariat the revolutionary agent, colonialism modifies that conclusion in several ways.

First, Marx analyzed how society's economic base determines its ideological superstructure. Fanon saw the opposite as more the reality in the colonies. Colonialism imposed its ideological superstructure to shaping the colony's economic base.

Oppression means more than discrimination but a whole "social constellation" that hides the true nature of the economy. Racism doesn't only function to mask inequality and dehumanization, but is a material reality on its own. Fanon suggested that this feedback loop can continue as colonial societies gain formal independence.

Second, colonialism developed fewer educational and cultural institutions to lubricate relations between classes, and therefore the governing class must depend more on the direct force of the police and military.

Third, the working class in colonial societies is small and relatively privileged. This minimizes its capacity to be an agent of change. Fanon also notes that bourgeois elements are mainly tied to the export market and therefore have little interest in developing production to feed, cloth and house the population.

Additionally, Fanon noticed that capitalism as a world system was undergoing change. As it was undergoing a process of remaking itself, both its economic base and its ideological superstructure were being altered. In a post-colonial world racism and the violence that accompanies it would have to be hidden by more abstract economic processes.

## Racial Capital's Evolution

Kundnani is interested in how racism evolves from what Fanon calls “vulgar, primitive and simplified” beliefs (e.g. alleged biological difference) to the racism hidden beyond seemingly neutral laws and regulations. In post-Jim Crow America, the U.S. government’s campaigns such as “the war on drugs,” “the war on terror” and the growing war against immigrants are issues that do not mention skin color or ethnicity but disproportionately kill, imprison, exclude and deport people of color.

For Kundnani it is the works of James, Césaire and Fanon that explain structural racism. It can be seen as a set of laws and procedures that operate at “a deeper, hidden level than the statute-book laws human beings consciously make.”

Kundnani locates Americans — from W.E.B. Du Bois through Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King and Jamil Al-Amin (formerly known as H. Rap Brown) — as also defining racism as structural. He notes that when MLK spoke of Northern cities, he described Black communities as “internal colonies” and advocated tactics that seemed reminiscent of African struggles: boycotts, rent strikes, blocking highways.

But today, Kundnani warns us, the very idea of racism as being structural is dismissed by the right, which claims discrimination only counts if it is proven to be “intentional.”

Kundnani includes a discussion of the theoretical problem Marxists encountered with the South African National Party government’s imposition of apartheid as its official policy in 1948. Like the United States, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa was an independent country ruled by descendants of white settlers. But unlike those other industrialized countries, the majority of the population was black.

As they examined the post-World War II South African economic and political framework, a group of independent Marxists described a governmental structure that maintained a modern capitalist society for the white minority while imposing “reserves” for the majority. Surveillance, including “pass laws,” functioned to enforce apartheid.

Black men were employed in modern auto, steel or textile plants, with another half-million working in mines, but their families remained in the rural areas. Racial segregation and property ownership “was not an ideological maneuver to manipulate white workers, but rather constituted the material infrastructure of the entire South African political and economic systems.” (131)

South African apartheid was different from the national oppression that blocked a colonized economy — it was a different form of internal colonialism. Apartheid, these Marxists concluded in the 1970s, “was the consequence of capitalist development.”

A pamphlet authored by Martin Legassick and David Hemson, *Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa* (1976), argued that apartheid was not the product of irrational prejudice but the logical outgrowth of a system that controlled Africans and maximized profit. (Also included in the group of independent Marxists were Neville Alexander, who served 10 years on Robinson Island, Bernard Magubane and Harole Wolpe.)

In the areas where Africans lived, units based on family networks worked the communal land. Distribution was carried out through kinship rules, not through market mechanisms. The existence of the two modes of production functioned so that the subsistence economy subsidized the capitalist economy. As Kundnani summarized their findings, apartheid was “the ideological and material

boundary between the two different systems.” (132-137)

Unlike the way the capitalist economy developed in England, capitalism didn't wipe out pre-capitalist production but folded it into a subordinate position within the capitalist structure. This failure to universalize wage labor was the result of state institutions that perpetuated racism, violence and coercion.

Racism wasn't so much a legacy of the past but an operating material force in the present, “dividing Black and white labor materially as well as ideologically.” The conclusion that follows is that, in Kundnani's words:

*“There was therefore little prospect that Black and white could become conscious of their true, shared interests as in the old slogan, ‘unite and fight.’ Rather, there would have to be an autonomous Black struggle against racial capitalism.”* (137)

## **Further Analyses**

Moving next to an analysis of Cedric Robinson's work, Kundnani finds him preoccupied with how capitalism utilized a variety of economic forms to coerce its work force. Capitalism was not a universalizing force but capable of mixing pre-existing aspects with the most modern, including slavery, debt bondage, “free,” “contract” and “casual” labor.

Differing labor relationships conferred different rights and privileges, and increased profitability for capitalists. There were boundaries between citizens and non-citizens, between free and unfree labor, between those who have protected jobs and those who don't.

Robinson proposed that racism and capitalism were not autonomous systems with their own dynamics but merged into a unitary explanation. Accordingly, “Capitalism did not melt away these preexisting structures of racism but instead mediated them.” (143) This meant that South African capitalism was not exceptional but revealed the universal reality of racial capitalism. It is an analysis that emphasizes the role of the state in maintaining boundaries.

Kundnani summarizes the two central issues that concerned Robinson: finding the origins of racism and tracing how racism continues to be reproduced. Locating “racist sensibilities” in European views of Slavs, Irish, Jews and Muslims at least from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Robinson traced racism's development. He saw its impact on both relations of production and forms of consciousness.

For Robinson racism does not begin with capitalism but precedes the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. This story of racism's origins reveals its ability to maintain its grip over time.

While Robinson found that a changing capitalist economy altered racist forms, he remarked that racism was capable of regenerating itself. He concluded that racism could not be explained in terms of property and labor relations but resided in “the transmission of Western cultural norms.” (145)

But seeing racial capitalism as one system didn't lead to a submerging of the struggle against racism. For Robinson, the key to forging a revolutionary path was through “the Black radical tradition.” This was a possible solution because its conception of “property” was different from the one that dominated the West.

For Stuart Hall, a Jamaican who migrated early to England, capitalism was a complex structure that had different modes of production and legal systems to match. Racism functioned — at least provisionally — to make it seem natural that some groups are unfree, disconnecting the historical process that led to their lack of freedom.



Unlike Robinson, Hall did not view racism as hard-wired into Western culture but thought it had to survive by remaking itself with each new generation. History does not provide the answer for racism's continued existence. Instead it must be discovered in race relations that are directly linked to specific economic processes: "Racist attitudes and beliefs derive from capitalism's racial division of labor; they do not produce it." (151)

That is, Hall — a founder and editor of what became known as *New Left Review* — wasn't interested in identifying racism's "founding moment," whether in Aristotle's defense of slavery or in the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion in 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia. The past could not be an alibi for the present. We must deal with how racism functions in today's world.

Hall examined the layers of discrimination that Afro-Caribbean and South Asian immigrants faced in a stratified and internally antagonistic British working class. This might result in they or their children becoming part of the "surplus" population who face police surveillance. In that case, race relations could stand in for class as a structural element of segmented labor. As Hall wrote in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978): "Race is the modality in which class is lived." (154)

## **Drawing Some Conclusions**

Kundnani's conclusion, from examining these activist-writers, acknowledges racism's capacity to alter itself. He starts by quoting A. Sivanandan, who founded and edited *Race and Class*:

*"Racism does not stay still; it changes shape, size, contours, purpose, function — with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system and, above all, the challenges, the resistances to the system.' Racism has only survived by constantly adapting and reconfiguring itself in the face of resistance. Since the traces of that resistance are always registered in structures, racism cannot be properly understood without acknowledging its disruptions as much as its continuities. To have any chance of success, antiracism cannot deal in abstractions or re-fight the battles of the past; it must address itself to the specific character of the context it operates in."* (151-152)

Whether or not I am in agreement with Kundnani's recounting of some of the history he covers, his approach is a well-grounded materialist perspective. Clearly, no matter how closely race may stand in for class, antiracists are wise to see the distinction.

As a former member of the SWP, I have found the writings of Trotsky and C.L.R. James helpful in seeing class and race as connected but not identical. The 1939 discussions held between Trotsky and SWP leaders (including James) in Mexico not only clarified this connection but concluded that African Americans were "potentially the most revolutionary element of the population."

Despite Kundnani's brief discussion on Claudia Jones' writings on the oppression of Black working women, he doesn't integrate the dynamics of gender oppression into this account. Although that would have resulted in a much longer book, it leaves many questions unanswered.

The book's final chapters outline how capitalism rules the world and remolds racism to meet its particular needs. That uneven and combined character can be summed up by radical geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore as "Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it." (149)

As Stuart Hall stresses, capitalism disguises racism through its seemingly neutral rules. Boundaries police it, whether they be borders or prisons — necessitating a security apparatus to police them.

Before the "scientific age" of Enlightenment supposedly ushered in rational explanations, inequality

was simply lived reality. But a society where everyone seemingly has equal rights needs to explain the exceptions. What is more “natural” than an explanation rooted in some physical or ethnic difference?

Kundnani faults liberal anti-racism in failing to understand that trap. He identifies this limited understanding of racism with the earlier social-democratic programs of the U.S. New Deal and the post-World War II British Labour government. Those either carved out exceptions or ignored outright the “structures of law and policy, and broader economic and institutional practices.” (250)

Still, one might ask, what force is the revolutionary agent today? Certainly we can point to the leadership role Indigenous people are playing in environmental struggles worldwide. And like the Haitian slaves they too have a past that provides them with the ability to imagine a non-capitalist future.

If the exploited and oppressed have the capacity to transform the world, the slogan that continues to leap over boundaries is put forward by Lenin and Roy, “Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite.”

The author demands “a darker red” and points to Césaire’s comment that there are two traps: walled segregation or a dilution of the universal. Instead, Césaire envisions a universal “enriched by all that is particular.” (251) The last paragraph of the final chapter describes a massive march where separate contingents reach the same destination.

*What Is Anti-racism? And Why It Means Anti-capitalism* summarizes how racism is embedded in the culture of imperialism and refashioned with each generation. The purpose of the analysis is to shine a light on the neutral laws and policies that allow it to flourish. Above all that means developing a commitment adequate to ending it.

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**P.S.**

- Against the Current No. 230, May/June 2024:  
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc230/innovatively-stretching-marxism/>