

“A colossal waste of millions of dollars”

# Ibram X. Kendi’s “antiracism research center” squanders \$43 million, lays off staff

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On Wednesday, Boston University announced that it would open an inquiry into Ibram X. Kendi’s Center for Antiracist Research, after Kendi last week laid off most of its staff— and amidst revelations based on extensive investigation by the *Daily Free Press*, the university’s independent student paper, that the Center, which has been showered with tens of millions of dollars from wealthy individuals and major corporations, has somehow lost all the money and has little work to show for it.

The episode at Boston University reveals—once again—the pecuniary, intellectually bankrupt, and essentially fraudulent character of racist ideology. It follows exposures of another duo of celebrity “anti-racists,” Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nahesi Coates, who have likewise accepted millions of dollars from corporations for an institute at Howard University that has produced negligible work, as well as the ongoing revelations that Black Lives Matter, presented to the public as a “movement,” is little more than a hollow shell created to disorient the youth and suck up corporate cash for the personal use of the grifters who run the organization.

The episode shines a light on the seedy underside of racist politics, which was elevated to the status of an official ideology of American capitalism in the wake of the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, at the hands of Minneapolis police. The murder triggered a wave of spontaneous protests against police brutality across the US, from the big cities to the small towns in all 50 states, as well as in a number of other countries. The demonstrations, notable for their interracial character, shook the American ruling class.

The Trump administration responded to the Floyd protests by threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act, in effect menacing the population with a presidential dictatorship. But decisive ruling layers favored a different course. The Democratic Party, the military, the corporations, the universities, and most of the giant media monopolies responded by embracing racialism—and by deepening the war drive against Russia, which now bears its bitter fruit in Ukraine.

Emblazoned across platforms ranging from beer commercials to professional basketball courts to streaming media, “Black Lives Matter” replaced “*e pluribus unum*” as the nation’s motto. Americans were told: The decisive issue is not police violence or the capitalist system it upholds, but “anti-black racism,” which, the *New York Times* *1619 Project* explained, is an ineradicable “original sin” imprinted in a national “DNA.”

The Floyd protest movement was soon disoriented by toxic racist ideology. Protest organizers began to demand the hiving off of white participants to form “safe spaces” for “people of color.” Egged on by

Hannah-Jones and her many social media acolytes, demonstrations were diverted to attack monuments to the American Revolution and the Civil War, including those dedicated to revolutionary leaders such as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Grant, and even to martyrs for equality such as the abolitionists Christian Heg (1829-1863) and Robert Gould Shaw (1837-1863).

It was in this immediate context of the summer of 2020 that Kendi was gifted the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University. Indeed, the center was announced just ten days after Floyd’s killing, with protests still ongoing. Jack Dorsey, the billionaire founder of Twitter, handed over \$10 million. Major corporations followed suit, and soon Kendi found himself sitting on a mountain of cash.

But what were Kendi’s qualifications? He was the author of two books that had been heavily promoted in the media, *Stamped from the Beginning* and *How to be an Antiracist*. The former, very much like the 1619 Project, argues that racism is an immutable feature of American society stretching back to the Enlightenment, which the author views to be a racist conspiracy. The latter falls into the execrable self-help genre, a reliably lucrative branch of American publishing.

Like all such books, Kendi argues that racism is essentially an individual matter. If white people of good conscience take certain steps—including of course purchasing Kendi’s books!—only then can they move toward casting off their inner racism, which, like repentant sinners at a camp revival, they first must admit. In Kendi’s view of things the very worst type of white person is the sort that does not see her- or himself as racist.

Corporations, universities, and the American pseudo-left swallowed Kendi’s writing hook, line, and sinker, along with the 1619 Project, then at the height of its fame, and the parallel work of another race guru, Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility*. Here was a ready-made means of diverting workers and students from the COVID-19 pandemic, mounting social inequality, global ecological crisis, and the threat of nuclear war! All that matters is race. *Race yesterday, race today, race forever!* On this basis, Kendi was handed his very own center.

And after just three years it has all fallen apart.

The immediate cause of the collapse seems to be that the Center for Antiracism Research has somehow burned through most of the \$43 million corporate sponsors gave to it. This necessitated gutting the staff. Starting two weeks ago, Kendi hosted a series of Zoom meetings in which he laid off “almost all” of the Center’s workforce, reportedly 20-30 employees. Sounding very much like a corporate PR

spokesman, Kendi said that the firings pained him terribly. But the firings raised an obvious question: *What had become of the \$43 million?*

"I don't know where the money is," said Saida Grundy, a sociology professor who had a position in the center for a year. Grundy revealed that she had raised concerns with Boston University administration almost two years earlier. In a December, 2021 letter to Provost Jean Morrison she pointed to a "pattern of amassing grants without any commitment to producing the research obligated." She added, "[t]o the best of my knowledge, there is no good faith commitment to fulfilling funded research projects" at the center. Grundy says the Center retaliated for her whistle blowing by refusing to offer a renewal of her affiliation.

Another faculty member affiliated with the Center, political scientist Spencer Piston, told the Boston University student newspaper, *The Daily Free Press*, that it "has been a colossal waste of millions of dollars."

"It's pretty hard for me to imagine they blew through \$30 million in two years," said Phillippe Copeland, a professor in BU's School of Social Work. "There's been a lack of transparency about how much money comes in and how it's spent from the beginning, which comports with a larger culture of secrecy."

According to the *Boston Globe* "current and former employees" of the center have "described a dysfunctional work environment that made it difficult to achieve the center's lofty goals." An anonymous manager, recently laid off by Kendi, told the *Daily Free Press* that the work of the institute was subordinated to Kendi's persona. "It was mostly about him, rather than the work," the manager said. Copeland, who recently resigned from the center, said that it "was just being mismanaged on a really fundamental level."

Copeland also explained that Kendi was inaccessible. As a matter of fact, when Kendi appeared at Boston University to announce the layoffs, he was returning from an extended "leave of absence." What work Kendi was on leave from is unclear, but during his hiatus from his academic duties he had been quite busy making money away from the university. As the *Globe* reports,

Kendi has completed a number of personal projects since 2020, including a graphic novel focused on the history of racist ideas, a podcast called "Be Antiracist," and a five-episode TV show scheduled to debut Wednesday on ESPN+.

One suspects that with demands like these, Kendi has very little time to teach classes in Boston University's History Department, of which he is listed as a member.

Boston University's inquiry appears to be an effort at damage control. It was announced publicly, according to the *Globe*, only hours after reporters approached the university administration with "extensive questions about the center's operations."

Indeed, the suggestion of corruption at the Center for Antiracism Research, and its failure to produce substantial work, are as damaging to the university administration as they are to Kendi. This was perhaps the most high-profile initiative undertaken by Boston University in recent years. While university administrators have been promoting Kendi and his Center since its founding in 2020, over the same period they have forced custodial staff to work through the COVID-19 pandemic, imposed hundreds of layoffs on faculty and staff, and have

continued to demand as much as \$60,000 in tuition per undergraduate student.

There is nothing left-wing, much less radical or oppositional, about figures like Kendi, Hannah-Jones, and Coates. They decry "institutional racism," but have been handed millions upon millions of dollars by numerous institutions of American capitalism, through book contracts, corporate foundation grants, hefty lecture fees, and academic sinecures. If their ideas were at all challenging to the capitalist status quo, then none of this would be happening. In a very real sense, these individuals are not just the loyal servants of capitalism, but its creations.

Perhaps Martin Luther King, Jr. had something like this in mind when, near the end of his life, he criticized this sort of racial politics, then in its infancy. "What you're saying may get you a foundation grant," he said to right-moving leaders of the Civil Rights movement. "[B]ut it won't get you into the Kingdom of Truth."

King was observing a tendency that has become much more pronounced in the more than half-century since his assassination. For those willing to tell the American ruling class what it wants to hear—that there are no problems outside of race—there are careers to be had and great money to be made. The major newspapers, publishing houses, universities, and corporate foundations stand ready, checkbook in hand.

But something much more important is involved than money. Racial ideology has always been a crucial pillar of capitalist rule in America. Its essential purpose, now as ever, is to divide the working class. Racialism, with its pretensions to antiracism, aims to disorient radicalizing youth who are driven by the crisis of capitalism to confront social problems. And it aims to subordinate black workers to the Democratic Party through the the African American elite—an elite of which Kendi, Coates, and Hannah-Jones are members in good standing.

The tragic paradox is that, in propping up race, racial ideology only serves to embolden actual white racists and anti-Semites. No doubt, Kendi's imbroglia will be seized on by the right-wing to promote its own nationalist agenda. And, just as assuredly, Kendi's defenders will claim that all of his critics are of the same cloth as those on the far right. This is how Hannah-Jones and her followers defended the 1619 Project from scholarly and left-wing criticism led by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Contrary to the charlatans and grifters who promote racist ideology, racism will never be defeated except in the unity of the working class—in solidarity across races, religions, and national borders—in the fight for socialism.



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