

Racial Habits and Collective Action: A Response to Stemhagen and Hytten

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In their paper “Pragmatism, Antiracism, and New Democratic Possibilities,” Kurt Stemhagen and Kathy Hytten argue for a reconstitution of pragmatist philosophy as a potential tool in the struggle against racial injustice and white supremacy.¹ Pragmatism, they argue, involves the union of thought and action: of using inquiry as a tool for social change and vice versa. The kind of pragmatism Stemhagen and Hytten are especially interested in involves the reshaping of our democratic and racial habits—the sorts of habits that, under currently existing conditions, lead to the oppression of African Americans and other people of color.

Stemhagen and Hytten, drawing from the work of black pragmatists, outline three habits that especially privileged people should develop to disrupt racism: (i) strategically holding dualistic ideas in tension, (ii) renarrativizing the past, and (iii) sitting with discomfort.

There is no doubt that such habits are important and that we should work to develop them. Here, however, I want to suggest that the three habits Stemhagen and Hytten focus on are insufficient and unnecessary for disrupting structural racism and, moreover, that the black pragmatists that Stemhagen and Hytten are inspired by also believed so.

Each of the habits that Stemhagen and Hytten describe are what we might call habits of thought and discourse: that is, they are chiefly concerned with how we (especially those of us in privileged classes) *think* and *talk* about racial justice. But precisely because they are only habits that govern how we think and talk about race, not habits governing how we *act*, they are not sufficient for meaningfully disrupting structural racism.

Consider an example. The median black family in the United States has a net worth of \$17,150. The median white family, on the other hand, has a

net worth of \$171,000—nearly ten times more.² Such vast inequalities are clear examples of structural racism. Consider, then, a world similar to our own, but one where one morning all white people wake up capable of holding dualistic ideas in tension, renarrativizing the past, and sitting with discomfort. Would such a change eliminate the black-white wealth gap? It seems clear to me that it would not. A widespread change in how white people think and talk about racism might lead them into voting differently, or perhaps being less discriminatory in their personal and professional lives. But first, it is not at all clear that most non-wealthy white voters have much influence on American politics; and second, even eliminating racial discrimination would be insufficient for closing the black-white wealth gap since much of this gap is explained by factors that have little to do with discrimination (such as the fact that black families, on average, inherit less wealth than white families).³ The black-white wealth gap might be tackled by reparations, investment in black education, or a radical overall redistribution of wealth—but cultivating anti-racist habits of thought and discourse among white people would seemingly not do much, if anything, to disrupt this form of racism.

The view that habits of thought and discourse are insufficient for combating racism also appears to be the view of many of the black pragmatists that Stemhagen and Hytten see as inspirations for their view. As they briefly mention, Eddie Glaude Jr. argues that “changing policies and addressing structural racism are the first steps toward undoing our racial habits.”⁴ Cornel West makes a similar claim, arguing that his prophetic pragmatism “revels in the life of the mind yet relates ideas to *collective* praxis.”⁵ Another black philosopher inspired by the pragmatist tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois, makes a similar point:

My basic theory had been that race prejudice was primarily a matter of ignorance on the part of the mass of men. . . . [But] beyond my conception of ignorance and deliberate ill-will as causes of race prejudice, there must be other and stronger and more threatening forces, forming the founding stones of race antagonisms, which we had only begun to attack or perhaps in reality had not attacked at all. Moreover,

the attack upon these hidden and partially concealed causes of race hate, must be led by Negroes in a program which was not merely negative in the sense of calling on white folk to desist from certain practices and give up certain beliefs; but direct in the sense that Negroes must proceed constructively in new and comprehensive plans of their own.⁶

Du Bois, as I read him here, is arguing that the project of inculcating anti-racist habits of thought and discourse in relatively privileged people (“calling on white folk to desist from certain practices and give up certain beliefs”) is insufficient for combating racism since racism is not just a matter of ignorance or deliberate ill will: it is a political structure that perpetuates itself because it is in the interests of the powerful. What is required for dismantling this structure, then, is not just more careful thought and discussion about racial injustices among white people but a political struggle led by Black Americans.

All of these authors, then, treat the sculpting of new racial habits not as a project of changing how we think and talk but as a project of collective action aimed at structural change in institutions and policies. Stenhagen and Hytten’s exclusive focus on habits of thought and discourse is not to be found in the black pragmatist tradition they aim to reconstruct.

It might now be argued that while habits of thought and discourse are insufficient for disrupting racist structures, they might still be *necessary* for such a project. It might be the case that the kind of successful collective action that is capable of securing anti-racist policies requires its participants to think and engage in discourse in accordance with Stenhagen and Hytten’s three habits. If the individual participants of a movement for reparations, for example, are not capable of holding dualisms in tension, renarrativizing the past, and sitting with discomfort, perhaps their collective goal will remain out of reach.

Whether these habits really are necessary in successful political struggle is a sociological question and thus not something that philosophers can resolve from their armchairs. However, there are reasons to doubt the necessity of such habits given the history of anti-racist struggle. The Civil Rights

Movement certainly disrupted many racist institutions (though, of course, not completely), but it is likely that many white participants in that movement were not the sort of committed anti-racists capable of Stenham and Hytten's three habits. In general, it hardly seems necessary that all participants in an anti-racist social movement be personally committed anti-racists. A white person, for example, who is incapable of holding dualisms in tension, sitting with discomfort, or renarrativizing the past may take to the streets during a Black Lives Matter protest simply because he believes the police have too much power over ordinary citizens of all races. Such a person might be entirely unaware of the markedly racist history of policing, might be unable to accept their complicity in white supremacy, or might even hold racist prejudices. But though this person may not be a committed anti-racist, his actions still disrupt a racist structure—the American institution of policing. Perhaps if a social movement's participants are committed anti-racists, it is *likelier* that their collective action will result in anti-racist structural change, but this hardly seems like a necessary condition.

None of this is to say that anti-racist habits of thought and discourse are useless. They are crucially important features of being a good citizen and a decent person. Acknowledging our privileges and understanding our complicity in systems of oppression are clearly moral virtues. The cultivation of such habits, then, is important, perhaps especially in classroom contexts, where students should learn the skills they need to navigate discussions and inquiry into racial injustice and its history. But we should not conflate the project of forming anti-racist individuals with the project of disrupting racist structures: the former, though important in its own right, is neither sufficient nor necessary for the latter.

Further developments of a “pragmatism in blue,” then, should look beyond merely how we think and talk about racial injustice. One productive avenue of investigation might, instead, look toward the shaping of what we may call habits of collective action: the sorts of habits that lead to successful political struggle. Solidarity, a willingness to sacrifice one's own comfort for the sake of others, and the capacity to organize might be such habits.

Luckily, the project of outlining habits of collective action need not begin from scratch. We might look to either West or Glaude for guidance but also to black pragmatists that preceded them, such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. A cohesive reconstruction of this tradition would require not just an account of the habits of thought and discourse needed for the creation of anti-racist individuals but also an account of the habits of collective action required for successful struggle against racist structures. Of course, these projects are likely to interact, but neither should be collapsed into the other.

1 Kurt Stenhagen and Kathy Hytten, “Pragmatism, Antiracism, and New Democratic Possibilities,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).

2 Kriston McIntosh et al., “Examining the Black-White Wealth Gap,” *Brookings Institute*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>.

3 Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Joanna Taylor and Tatjana Meschede, “Inherited Prospects: The Importance of Financial Transfers for White and Black College-Educated Households’ Wealth Trajectories,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77, no 3-4 (2018): 1049-1076.

4 Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 69.

5 Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 234 (emphasis added).

6 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 141-142.