

## **On Race, Power, Human Nature, And Cosmopolitanism**

Mary Lihong Peng

In 'Race in the Modern World', Appiah delivers an eloquent critique of racial divide, elaborating on the problem of politicizing segregation, the danger of intentionally rationalizing injustice, and the vision of a cosmopolitan world. Appiah invites us to contemplate some of the fundamental issues that underlie contemporary forms of racial struggle, including the nature of race, power, human motives, and citizenship. In this short essay, I will attempt an analysis of the social reality of power and human nature that drives the creation of racial inequality, and expand on Appiah's statement of human brotherhood to argue for the necessity and urgency of embracing a cosmopolitan ethics as a means to resolve racial tension.

Grounded in essentialist representations of race and perpetuated by the socio-political rationalization of such categorizations, racial struggle is ultimately a form of power struggle. As suggested by Appiah, "racial prejudice and discrimination in the world today arise from historical and social phenomenon and falsely claim the sanction of science". The historical and social phenomenon of racial segregation exposes the rigid mentality, albeit often subconscious and unintentional, that creates and cements the divide along ethno-racial lines. It is ingrained in human nature for people to seek communities that offer them a sense of recognition, belonging, and security. While such inclination might be deep-rooted in our innate cognitive faculty, the hierarchy of dominance and subordination enforced upon different social groups cannot be justified. When the relationship between in-groups and out-groups becomes one of superiority and inferiority whereby disparate resources are distributed to different social locations according to their perceived social status, categorization of social groups becomes a source of segregation, deprivation, and injustice. The course of human history is infiltrated by all forms of rationalization of racial oppression through socio-cultural, religious, economic, and ideological frameworks, which lends a false air of normativity to the current racial dynamics. Purposeful distortion of truth serves to facilitate the fulfillment of human motives, which, in the context of racial injustice, primarily consist of desires for power that fuels the establishment of a capitalist hierarchy. The scarcity of resources against the backdrop of a competitive market propels the perpetual power struggle among social groups. As the dominant groups solidify their power by enforcing the identity-based hierarchy of privilege, they invent social constructs to justify stratification through economic and political manipulation. The socio-cultural internalization and manifestation of this hierarchy then dictates that identity boundaries, which are inherently politically irrelevant, become the foundation for power disparity, inequality, and discrimination. Hence, the intentional rationalization of differences dictated by the power play within political and socio-economic institutions underlies the issue of racial inequality in all its guises.

In light of the current power dynamics among races, Appiah directs our attention to

mankind's potential to progress towards a cosmopolitan society---"a human brotherhood". I believe that cosmopolitanism is not a concept exclusively applied to the citizenry of the world, and bears much significance in the resolution of racial tension in a national context. The core of a cosmopolitan mindset is simply the ability to empathize, recognize, tolerate and embrace differences. Appiah's vision of a world of equality cannot be fully realized unless people are willing to bypass their rigid "us versus them" mentality. The tension between emotions and reason is one internal hurdle that has prevented society from recognizing the necessity of cosmopolitanism. One's capacity to acknowledge the commonality among the whole humanity is grounded in their willingness to forgo their compulsive appetite for a sense of superiority. Arrogance and vanity, given the tremendous satisfaction and egoistic pleasure that usually arise from these sentiments, would be difficult to overcome, but not entirely impossible. As Plato's tripartite theory of soul suggests, human nature might not be able to escape the conflict between reason and desire, but people have the innate capacity to govern their mind with rationality. I'd argue that one's faulty to recognize reason and humanity whenever and wherever it occurs could eventually triumph over the hollow pleasure of superiority. To accelerate the collective progress towards cosmopolitanism, we must undertake great effort in education and design it to shape people into moral and responsible citizens who can recognize the value of equality and condemns the manipulation of power towards selfish ends. John Locke's narrative of the state of nature, where "all power and jurisdiction is reciprocal and all human beings—as creatures born indiscriminately with all the same natural advantages and faculties—are equal amongst themselves", provides both the rationale behind and the ultimate vision of Appiah's human brotherhood.

Unfortunately, the urgency of embracing a cosmopolitan ethics in the quest for racial liberation and reconciliation is often undermined by the false accusation of cosmopolitanism as a means to achieve social homogeneity. Appiah's vision might be bombarded with opposing voices, such as Gertrude Himmelfarb who speaks vehemently of the illusions of cosmopolitanism, whereby the idea of pledging one's fundamental allegiance to humanity is deemed as impossible as it requires people to transcend not only racial identities but all the actualities, particularities and realities of life. However, the claim that to overlook racial differences is to purposefully strip an identity group of its right to unique self-representation is essentially a misconception because the assumed equalization between cosmopolitan ethics and uniform oneness is mistaken. I'd argue that a cosmopolitan mindset does not necessarily eradicate the unique influence of cultural and historical heritage of a race. Rather, it intends to demolish the barriers between members of different races on the basis of mutual recognition and respect so as to seek unity through diversity and ultimately create a sense of wholeness. A new and stronger sense of belonging will be forged as people of a particular race create more diverse emotional and social ties with those outside their identity group who they could then

identify and empathize with.

Fundamentally, racial issues are human issues. As Dr. Martin Luther King points out in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. Our lives are intricately weaved into a web of shared destinies. If equality is to exist at all, it is only reasonable to allow it to exist in all forms and all social locations. To allow power equality only within prestigious social groups not only perpetuates the unjust hierarchy of oppression, but also renders the pursuit of equality an act of hypocrisy and failure. The denial of racial justice is the denial of human justice. Given the reality of human nature and capitalism-driven power struggle, one is burdened with a difficult but sacred task to rebel against inequality. To seek morality and humanity, one needs to embrace a cosmopolitan ethics to alleviate the distrust that obscures racial justice. The pervasiveness of civil disobedience reinforces the necessity and urgency of cosmopolitanism as a solution to the challenge of today’s racial politics. I do believe that one day we will arrive at a stage where people would dedicate themselves to equality and justice and embrace true cosmopolitan ethics. In this ideal world, we’ll constantly exercise our intellectual faculty to recognize and honor the reason and moral capacity of humanity as a whole, pledging our ultimate allegiance to the worldwide community of human beings.

## **Bibliography**

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