

The Moral Capital of Calling Somebody “a Racist”

Many people in our culture who use the term “racist” seem to believe that there are “racists” out there and “not racists” out there in the world. In other words, many people who call other people “racist” seem to deny the degree to which they themselves have internalized the narrative of white supremacy. Calling someone “racist,” then, actually becomes just an act of egotistical self-affirmation. If you have the wherewithal to call someone this “really bad word,” it inflates your moral superiority. This is not a new phenomenon. During the 1960s, many of the Southern businessowners Martin Luther King met with would claim to heaven that it wasn’t them who was racist, it was the society around them. If they hired more blacks, their customers wouldn’t patronize their business and their employees would quit. “I got no problem with blacks. I’d hire them if it wouldn’t run me out business,” they’d say. Dr. King heard it so often, it became anecdotal. This was not a new phenomenon. Thomas Jefferson claimed that the reason that blacks should be sent back to Africa was that blacks and whites simply could not live together in the same gov’t. “Nature, habit, and opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction around them,” he said. Jefferson claims that people were naturally racist, they were used to being racist, and they believed that racism was right, and so blacks had to go.

It is in fact the case that every person who was raised in the Western world—black, white, Asian, Latino, it don’t matter—entertains some notions of white supremacy, because its ubiquity is impossible to avoid. IT’S IN ALL OF US. There are no “not racists” in our society, it’s just a matter of degree. So the next time you hear someone call someone else a racist, ask that person how exactly they avoided that social conditioning. Were they raised on an island where racist ideas did not bombard them every day from infancy to adulthood? Cuz I wasn’t. Did they spend their childhood in a culture where every movie, TV show, and book showed blacks in heroic roles in equal proportion to their numbers in normal society? No? Me neither. Are they completely unfazed by the idea of all their children marrying interracially, since, genetically, this actually produces healthier children than “pure race” marriages? Do they have the same amount of suspicion when encountering poor white men in a dark alley as they do poor black men? ‘Cuz I wasn’t born on that island. And as a result I am constantly battling narratives in my head that the white man saves and that the white man heals. Conversely, I am constantly battling narratives that blacks are untrustworthy, or violent, or hypersexual, because I live in a society where those messages are constantly being slammed inside my brainhole. But I am willing to admit the degree to which these narratives invade, and that every day is a struggle to fight them off. I get no feeling of superiority by calling someone else a “racist,” because all it does is highlight how much they’ve been brainwashed. So I just try to unbrainwash them. Won’t you join me?