Political Theory

Understanding Racial Violence in the US through Hannah Arendt's Banality of Evil

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Abstract

Following recent discussions about Donald Trump's election and the return of Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism to the best-selling charts, scholars and commentators have directed their focus on the future implications of Arendt's political thought for contemporary American society. Looking at the connection between Arendt's other work on the banality of evil and America's issue of racism, one can see how Arendt's other ideas help to describe the current socio-economic and political environment. Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, as expounded in her later text Eichmann in Jerusalem, suggests that 'thoughtlessness' around the political systems, within which we participate, enables participation in larger evils. Later concepts help to clarify and extend Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil. Structural violence, or the joint occurrence of high inequality, social exclusion, and humiliation, exists in structures to deny the rights of marginalized people. Similarly, cultural violence latent within ideologies, religions, science, or art, provides support for structural and direct violence, making it appear normal. By revealing the broader structural and societal factors that allow racial violence in society, the diverse forms of violence help to link Arendt's notion of the banality of evil to racial violence. Those that uphold certain social, economic, and political structures or persist in discourses that normalize these acts of violence are found in the racial banality of evil. Drawing on Arendt's insights, this paper calls for increased awareness of unperceived racial violence in the United States and underscores the importance of avoiding 'thoughtlessness'.

Introduction

Following the recent rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States and the fears about new forms of authoritarianism, many commentators have turned to a book that was published around 65 years ago: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*[1] by Hannah Arendt.[2] It was selling at 16 times its normal rate a month after the election of Donald Trump.[3] This surprising hit has reintroduced Arendt's opinions on totalitarianism to the public once again after all of these years, and people have been making connections between her theory and modern political circumstances. Arendt's *Origins* describes how unchecked capitalism, racism, antisemitism, and the decline of the traditional concept of the nation-state combined to produce totalitarianism in the early twentieth century. In addition, Lyndsey Stonebridge suggests that modern loneliness, or the isolation of individuals who lose a sense of rootedness in the world, results in the loss of a shared reality.[4] Stonebridge highlights that once people lose their human connection to other people, it makes it possible for tribalism, mass violence, and the extermination of what Arendt calls "superfluous people" to take place.[5] Stonebridge and other commentators draw important connections between Arendt's notion of violence against 'superfluous people' and the prison system in the United States, poverty and racism in the housing estates in London, migrant camps around the borders of Europe, and the forgotten spaces in Middle America with no role in the global economy. These are places that house the new 'superfluous people that have been declared invisible and immaterial.[6]

The "trending" of Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* reflects a broad interest in Arendt's contributions to analyzing the current political environment. However, this piece is going to answer a related question on how another of Arendt's theories–the banality of evil–can be applied to the more specific issue of racism in the United States. Rather than

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[1] Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994).
[2] Isaac, Jeffrey. "Analysis | How Hannah Arendt's Classic Work on Totalitarianism Illuminates Today's America," *Washington Post*, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/17/how-hannah-arendts-classic-work/.
[3] Isaac, Jeffrey. "Analysis | How Hannah Arendt's Classic Work on Totalitarianism Illuminates Today's America," Washington Post, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/17/how-hannah-arendts-classic-work/.
[4] Illing, "A 1951 Book about Totalitarianism Is Flying off the Shelves. Here's Why." https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/17/how-hannah-arendts-classic-work/.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

applying Arendt's thoughts on totalitarianism to the Trump presidency or other global concerns about authoritarianism, this essay seeks to discuss how the concept of the banality of evil can be used to reveal hidden structural and cultural racial violence rooted in American life. By the end, it will be clear how ubiquitous "hidden" violence is crucial to understanding racial problems in the United States, and how to address the 'thoughtlessness' that perpetuates these acts of violence.

The first section introduces Arendt's concept of the banality of evil and her unique understanding of violence. It examines basic understandings of how violence can be enforced in subtle and inconceivable ways through societal structures that make average citizens a contributing force of "mass evil."[7] The second section offers an in-depth explanation of structural violence and links the banality of evil to examples of systemic racism in US society. The third section defines cultural violence and shows how modern examples of cultural violence link back to the Arendtian concept of the banality of evil. Examples of works on racial attitudes in the United States, such as Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract,* further underscore the discussion of the banality of evil and systemic racism. The fourth section connects ideas in the above sections together to explain how minimizing racial violence requires transforming and uprooting systemic racism and the attitudes that uphold it, with a major step being the effort to bring people away from being "thoughtless."

Arendt's Banality of Evil

Arendt's concept of the banality of evil indicates how members of modern society can be implicated in large-scale political violence. Coming from Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the banality of evil makes sense of Arendt's observations of the "normality" of Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, during his court testimony during his trial in Israel in 1961. The most unique characteristic Arendt notes about the banality of evil are that it can be 'committed on a gigantic scale' based on the most mundane and petty motivations.[8]

According to Arendt, the banality of evil allows groups of people to be slowly and systematically stripped of their rights and values.[9] This

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[7] Patrick Hayden, "Superfluous Humanity: An Arendtian Perspective on the Political Evil of Global Poverty," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (March 2007): 279–300, doi:10.1177/03058298070350021001.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

type of radical evil,[10] making human beings superfluous, gradually makes it possible for mass imprisonment, violence, and even genocide to happen.[11] In the case of Eichmann, 'sheer thoughtlessness' made Eichmann 'perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong' because he chose not to exercise his capacity to judge his actions beyond the values of the social system in which he functioned as an agent.[12] 'Thoughtlessness' thus makes mass political evil possible when individuals unquestioningly apply themselves within a system that makes groups of people superfluous.

This mindset is seen in the paradigmatic case of Eichmann, whom Arendt viewed as nothing more than an unthinking instrument who nevertheless managed a bureaucratic program to facilitate the dehumanization and eventual murder of others.[13] Within such a system, individuals like Eichmann do not recognize the nature of their actions because they simply act as a small step in the process that allows society to dehumanize others. Contrary to some interpretations, Arendt is not saying that everyone deep down can be a Nazi, but she is highlighting that it is important for people to consider the background systems that enable an incident like the Holocaust to identify the radical evils that modern mass society can perpetuate.

Types of contemporary political evil find expression in different types of mass suffering. Arendt scholars have linked her idea of the banality of evil to such structural issues as global poverty and economic globalization (growing inequality between the rich and the poor), policies making refugees and 'illegal immigrants' superfluous, and policing in the United States (the double-standard of policing with White and African-American citizens).[14] These examples all share hallmarks of the banality of evil, in which individuals and whole societies perpetuate social, economic, and political systems that render people superfluous. Linking Arendt's insights to contemporary wealth inequality, Arendt scholar Patrick Hayden suggests that "we have become desensitized to the banal, thoughtless, 'ordinary' origins of pervasive economic rights violations, as these have become normalized in the global politico-economic order."[15]

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[10] Richard J. Bernstein, "Are Arendt's Reflections on Evil Still Relevant?," *The Review of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008): 64–76, doi:10.1017/S003467050800017X.

[11] Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1st edition (New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 2006).

[12] Hayden, "Superfluous Humanity."

[13] Ibid.

[14] Shamsher Samra et al., "Interpersonal and Structural Violence in the Wake of COVID-19," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 11 (November 2020): 1659–1661, doi:10.2105/AJPH.2020.305930.

[15] Hayden, "Superfluous Humanity."

Despite the violence that the banality of evil can enable, Arendt importantly distinguishes such violence from genuine political power. While Arendt defines power as the human ability for a group of people to act in correspondence with each other to achieve political ends, violence is seen as a tool to achieve certain ends or an implementation of strength and power.[16] Because violence is used when people don't follow commands and disrespect authority, more violence is needed to achieve a given end, which further strips away power because violence erodes non-coercive authority and motivates people to resist.[17] As a result, Arendt claims that violence can only destroy power and cannot create power.

Structural Violence and Systemic Racism

Nuanced understandings of violence developed after the publication of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* helped to bring Arendt's notion of the banality of evil better into view regarding contemporary social problems. When most people think of violence, they are thinking of direct violence like war, murder, rape, or assault.[18] However, direct violence is only the most visible form of violence. As Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung has explained, structural and cultural violence often serve as invisible causes and effects of direct violence.

Structural violence reflects the understanding that violence can be exercised even when there are no concrete actors that one can point to directly attacking others. Unlike direct or acute violence, structural violence is therefore much harder to perceive.[19] By Peter Uvin's definition, structural violence is the joint occurrence of factors like high inequality, social exclusion, and humiliation.[20] High inequality and social exclusion take form in social structures that deny rights to certain marginalized people, such as unequal access to the state, development projects, and education. Humiliation is the social inferiority and powerlessness that marginalized people feel after experiencing social exclusion and inequality, which subjects them to exploitation and can eventually strip them of their self-respect and value.[21] As the examples

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[16] Arendt, Hannah. On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970).
[17] Ibid.
[18] "Varieties of Violence: Structural, Cultural, and Direct," TRANSCEND Media Service, accessed September 6, 2021, https://www.transcend.org/tms/2013/10/varieties-of-violence-structural-cultural-and-direct/.
[19] Uvin, Peter. "Global Dreams and Local Anger: From Structural to Acute Violence in a Globalizing World" (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2003).
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

from Hayden and other Arendt scholars cited above indicate, in its most extreme forms structural violence can render people superfluous, in Arendt's terminology, as they are stripped away of their rights and humanity.

Systemic racism exists side-by-side with racial violence. The *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case declared that slaves were property and not citizens. Even though later the 14th Amendment overruled *Dred Scott* by declaring that all persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens of the country and the 15th Amendment passed the right for people of all races to vote, the crippling of Reconstruction led to the recreation of previous situations of labor before the Civil War and loose interpretations of the Amendments. These included the Jim Crow laws (creating literacy tests and poll taxes when African Americans voted), economic and geographical redlining, and the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, where "separate but equal" became the notion for many Southern states.[22] The denial of citizenship rights, voting rights, and segregation for African Americans combined to create a social, economic, and political system that justifies the hierarchical division of races (here meaning race as a term for its social construct or societal understanding). Supreme Court case rulings were not easily changed and these rulings laid the legal foundations for large and enduring racial gaps in American social, political, and economic life.

These historical forms of structural violence have their modern manifestations. The double standard in dealing with issues related to drugs is apparent: drug problems afflicting Black communities have been treated as a "war on drugs" but the opioid crisis is called an "epidemic."[23] While the police allow white protestors to occupy State Capitols, Black protestors are maced and sprayed with water cannons. In addition to police violence, the incarceration rate of African Americans is nearly six times the rate of white people.[24] Structural violence compounds racist and classist consequences and other social problems, as seen in incidents like six times higher COVID-19 death rates in Black-majority counties as opposed to white-majority counties.[25] Similarly, "COVID-19 mortality rates are double in poor communities, which are often segregated by both race and class in the United States [...]

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[22] E. Chemerinsky, "The Case Against the Supreme Court": 37, 2014, accessed December 30, 2021.

[23] "The Banality of Systemic Racism – The Forward," accessed September 6, 2021, https://forward.com/scribe/449041/the-banality-of-systemic-racism/.

[24] "The Banality of Systemic Racism – The Forward."

[25] Shamsher Samra et al., "Interpersonal and Structural Violence in the Wake of COVID-19," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 11 (November 2020): 1659–1661, doi:10.2105/AJPH.2020.305930.

Nationwide, death rates are six times higher in predominantly Black versus White counties."[26] Structural inequality such as skyrocketing unemployment rates and racialized wealth inequality worsens the racist and classist impact of COVID-19 on racially marginalized communities.[27] Systems of inequality built up over centuries continue to run like a machine that directs violence toward marginalized people while not creating a single actor responsible. While structural violence is again often invisible, both structural and direct violence are also frequently justified through what Galtung calls cultural violence.

Cultural Violence and Cultural Racism

Similar to structural violence, cultural violence is an invisible force in society that impacts perceptions of direct and structural violence. Galtung describes cultural violence as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence."[28] Direct violence is thus understood as an *event*, structural violence as a *process*, and cultural violence as an *invariant*.[29] Cultural violence supports and provides the base for the growth of structural and direct violence by fostering a society that allows certain citizens to be superfluous and therefore open to victimization and violence. Structural violence and patterns of exploitation can build up on the societal base that is already created by cultural violence that also justifies the more visible direct violence perpetrated against certain groups.[30]

Cultural violence may take place in areas like religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, formal science, and cosmology. For instance, in the case of religion, religious narratives have been used to justify oppressive social structures rooted in race, gender, and class.[31] Religion can thus lead to the cultural acceptance of certain groups of people over other groups of people. Other cases include ideologies that debase the value of specifically constructed Others. The Other is often dehumanized and deprived of rights and protections through being blamed for specific social problems. For instance, Hitler describes the Jews as "vermin," Stalin describes the kulaks as the "class enemy," and Hutu extremists referred to the Tutsis as "cockroaches" during the

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[26] Samra et al., "Interpersonal and Structural Violence in the Wake of COVID-19."
[27] Samra et al.
[28] Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291, https://www.jstor.org/stable/423472.
[29] Galtung, "Cultural Violence": 294.
[30] Galtung, "Cultural Violence."
[31] Ibid.

Rwandan genocide. The acceptance of such an ideology dehumanizes the Other and makes direct and structural violence toward the Other seem normal. This relates to the case of Eichmann, who was embedded in a cultural system and governmental apparatus that promoted mass killing as acceptable. The cultural setting made the Jews the Other and made the extermination of the Jews a normal duty. This underlying cultural violence, coupled with Eichmann's apparent thoughtlessness and desire to succeed at his job, made him unable to see the systemic violence he was committing.

Science, although often considered empirical and unbiased, has oftentimes been used by people for the majority to support policies that promote the extermination of a group of people. The famous case of *Buck v. Bell* upheld the forced sterilization of women of childbearing age that were deemed "idiotic, imbecile, feebleminded of epileptic."[32] The social context creates the cultural setting that makes it seem only reasonable for *Buck v. Bell* to be upheld. The eugenics movement, social Darwinism, and the development of IQ tests similarly created a general fear around the reproduction of 'inferior' peoples.[33] The idea of forced sterilization was thus extremely popular and was supported by both conservatives and progressives, multiple presidents, and Nobel Peace Prize winners. In these situations, the cultural acceptance of violent narratives masks the violence of these laws, thus legitimizing direct and structural violence.[34] In addition, there is still the continued forced sterilization of migrant women at the US/Mexico border.[35]

The formation of cultural racism in the United States has been building for hundreds of years through the enslavement and murder of millions of African and indigenous peoples.[36] Centuries later, this direct violence is remembered only in history books (if at all), and slavery is seen as merely a past event.[37] This massive direct violence over centuries seeped down and sedimented as structural violence that maintains

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[32] Corinna Barrett Lain, "Three Supreme Court 'Failures' and a Story of Supreme Court Success," preprint (LawArXiv, May 2017): 1032, doi:10.31228/osf.io/5csgw.
[33] Corinna Barrett Lain, "Three Supreme Court 'Failures' and a Story of Supreme Court Success," preprint (LawArXiv, May 2017), doi:10.31228/osf.io/5csgw.
[34] Lain.
[35] M. Manian, "Immigration Detention and Coerced Sterilization: History Tragically Repeats Itself," *ACLU*, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/immigration-detention-and-coerced-sterilization-history-tragically-repeats-itself/>, accessed December 30, 2021.
[36] Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 295, https://www.jstor.org/stable/423472.
[37] Ibid.

unequal racial dynamics also commonly called systemic racism.[38] This systemic racism is supported by various forms of cultural violence, including ideas like pseudoscience that seek to prove the superiority of white Europeans. Charles Mills describes the sedimentation of direct violence into structural and cultural violence as part of the "racial contract" in the United States. Mills defines the racial contract as a set of agreements between whites to categorize the remaining subset of humans as "nonwhite" and of different and inferior moral status to ensure that they have a subordinate civil standing in white-ruled polities.[39]

Structural and cultural violence, along with Mills' notion of the racial contract, allow us to extend Arendt's notion of the banality of evil to understanding systemic racism in the US. All people who take part in the society that is upholding the racial contract essentially participate in producing and reproducing direct, structural, and cultural racial violence. What Arendt described as thoughtlessness prevents those privileged by the racial contract from identifying the way to root out the racial contract from their culture and social, political, and economic systems. The racial contract provides an additional theoretical language that reflects the interrelations between Arendt's notion of thoughtlessness, centuries of ideological formation of the superiority of white people and inferiority of the "nonwhites," larger systems of structural inequality, and the instances of acute racially-motivated violence.

The Banality of Evil and Racial Violence

Tying the last few sections together, cultural violence creates the norm that makes enduring structural violence possible. Both structural violence and cultural violence can create the conditions for direct or acute violence. As Uvin notes, exploitation, humiliation, and massive inequality result in direct violence among impacted communities, which cultural violence then blames on the victims themselves in ways that ignore these structural factors.[40]

As noted above, Arendt understood the banality of evil as playing a large part in modern forms of mass violence. When cultural violence provides the base for the formation of the racial banality of evil by dictating social norms, the banality of evil also fuels the occurrence of

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[38] Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 295, https://www.jstor.org/stable/423472.

[39] CHARLES W. MILLS, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press, 1997), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh1wj.

[40] Uvin, Galtung, "Cultural Violence."

direct and structural violence in society. Hitler's labeling of the Jews as "vermin" (cultural violence) seeped down into the subconsciousness of the citizens and eventually created the environment that allowed citizens to eventually think of and treat Jewish people as "vermin." Going back to Arendt's explanation in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt makes clear (using different language) that this type of cultural violence allowed Hitler to impose successive legal measures (structural violence) that lead to the Holocaust (direct violence). Even though Arendt is not trying to convince people that everyone could become a Nazi, she is actively trying to state that a background system can mask or normalize mass social and political violence like the Holocaust.[41] The example of Eichmann shows that the most mundane and normal humans can participate in large-scale political violence. Eichmann fulfilled his job to make sure the trains sending the Jews to concentration camps worked fast and well. It is his capability in his part of the job that contributed to the Holocaust. This example is important in that it explains how one can contribute towards a larger societal persecution with a clear conscience, and we can see a larger connection between the United States and the makings of Nazi Race Laws. Whitman explains that the "Nazis had always felt that their quest from *Lebensraum*, 'living space,' corresponded with the white American conquest of the West and the extermination of Native American tribes to mere remnants isolated on reservations."[42] The vagueness of race classifications in America inspired Nazis to reflect the same vagueness to serve the purpose of oppression.[43] These examples explain that structural violence and societal evil may manifest as different situations but still share immense similarities.

Applied to examples of systemic racism in the US, with its associated forms of direct, structural, and cultural violence, the banality of evil helps to explain how people without explicit racist intents can still uphold racist systems. When confronted with the history of anti-Black racism in the US, what Mills calls the "epistemology of ignorance" makes many whites unable to understand the world they created themselves,[44] in large part again through the cultural violence of discourse that breaks down racism into individual behaviors like "discrimination" and "prejudice" and makes slavery a past event recorded in history books.[45] The epistemology of ignorance encourages what Arendt called thoughtlessness, and therefore reproduces the racial order that secures

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[41] "The Grossly Misunderstood 'banality of Evil' Theory - Israel News - Haaretz.Com."

[42] "Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law, by James Q. Whitman." The Black Scholar: Pragmatic Utopias 48, no. 3 (2018): 61.

[43] Ibid., 61–63.

[44] MILLS, *The Racial Contract*.

[45] Galtung, "Cultural Violence."

the privileges of white citizens and maintains the subordination of nonwhites.[46] Both the epistemology and moves to innocence like settler nativism, fantasizing adoption, and equivocation allow white Americans to associate racism with direct violence that is not related to them as long as they do not perform direct violence.[47] Lack of individual participation in direct violence thus seems to justify and nullify structural racial violence that marginalized people still experience today, as this type of thoughtlessness actively prevents racially privileged people from effectively recognizing structural and cultural racial violence. The continuing use of racial ideologies through dog whistle politics similarly maintains the racial banality of evil in American society.

Modern policing in the United States also connects to Arendt's take on violence, and the distinction she draws between violence and power. According to Arendt's distinction between power and violence, once people stop trusting the police, their power and authority decline, making it more necessary for the government to resort to violence. Arendt's definition of power points to the ability of a group of people to work together towards a political ideal and that this gives power to an individual, group, or institution. But here violence from the police is only chipping away the power of the police and the legitimacy of the state by extension. There are also few realizations of how to fix the situation since people living in the society are in a "thoughtless" state. What is seen in direct assault incidents is, essentially, fueled by hundreds of years of structural and cultural violence, which then causes direct violence and the outrage of American citizens to happen.

Conclusion

Connecting the three types of violence – direct, structural, and cultural – to Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, we see racial violence in the United States in a new light. While visible examples of direct violence often receive the most attention, the thoughtless participation of many citizens in a society defined by structural and cultural violence also allows these banal forms of racial violence to persist in the country.

In the future, the problem could play out in many different ways. It could happen in a way following Arendt's ideas of violence stripping away power.[48] As more direct violence is used to maintain authority, marginalized people might be motivated to work together, giving them

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[46] MILLS.

[47] Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," n.d., 40.

[48] Arendt, Hannah. On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970).

more power to resist authority. However, Uvin also warns that structural violence frequently results in direct violence among the marginalized, who fight amongst themselves for the "remaining piece of the pie." If the root causes of racial violence – meaning structural violence, cultural violence, and thoughtlessness, racial violence will be sustained and passed on into the future.

Combatting thoughtlessness requires citizens to be aware of societal systems, historical violence, and citizen attitudes because it requires constant "thinking" and problem-solving from everyone. Thus, it is important to build a robust civic education system that critically engages racism in US history and to encourage a society that educates people to think critically and to engage in self-reflection. The cultural violence of the epistemology of ignorance and the structural violence that this denial of racism upholds perpetuate racial violence, even though many people are not directly involved in assaults against marginalized people.[49] Only by taking collective action to recognize the problems in the structures of the United States can we hope one day to make it a place truly accepting for all groups of people.

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[49] Rossing, "Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2017): 180, doi:10.14321/rhetpublaffa.20.1.0180.

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