Stephen D. Brookfield & Mary E. Hess (2021). *Becoming a white antiracist. A practical guide for educators, leaders and activists*. Stylus Publishing.

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Having had the honour and pleasure of interviewing Stephen Brookfield on various occasions (see Brookfield et al., 2019, 2022) and having read much of his impressive body of work, I was thrilled to read his latest – and 20th – book, *Becoming a white antiracist* (co-authored with Mary Hess). Unsurprisingly, it made for thought-provoking and inspiring reading. Brookfield and Hess are not just deep thinkers about race and racism, they also have decades of experience as facilitators of workshops and antiracist activists. Having become increasingly aware about his own 'race-blindness', Brookfield started to study the topic extensively during a self-imposed silence on race (in terms of publishing) that lasted a decade. Since 2003, he began to write about race, especially in the context of higher education. I reviewed his excellent *Teaching race. How to help students unmask and challenge racism* (Brookfield & Associates, 2018) in this journal (Rudolph, 2020); and *Becoming a white antiracist* can be considered a companion piece to *Teaching race.*

A brief introduction of the book's authors is in order. Brookfield's distinguished co-author is Mary Hess, a professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary who has worked with Brookfield before (leading to *Teaching reflectively in theological contexts*). Stephen Brookfield is a Distinguished Scholar at Antioch University, adjunct professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Professor Emeritus at the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, Minnesota).

The title of *Becoming a white antiracist* reminds me of the first book by Brookfield that I read – *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2017). I previously commented on the author's reflective humility in that book: that after fifty years of teaching, Brookfield still perceives himself as forever *becoming* a critically reflective teacher (Rudolph, 2019). 'Becoming' in Brookfield and Hess's latest book title is meant to be understood in a similar way. As white people, "we are always *becoming* antiracist, never quite there" (p. 27). The book was written during the turbulent years of 2019 and 2020 that witnessed "catastrophic climate change, a global pandemic and economic collapse" (p. 13). However, to Brookfield and Hess, "the most significant upheavals were those around racial justice":

"We were inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, outraged by the growth of anti-Blackness in the United States, and staggered by the way it became legal to tear immigrant families apart at the U.S. border and imprison children like animals in cages. Each week brought further instances of the slaughter of people of color and the demonization of anyone not of white European descent" (p. 13).

To the authors, "*race, especially anti-Blackness, is the biggest unaddressed problem in the United States*" (p. 86, emphasis in original), and "*race is really a problem of white people*" (p. 14, emphasis in original). Books like *Becoming a white antiracist* are needed to help white people think about their – often unacknowledged – white *racial* identity and develop an antiracist white identity. The authors argue against the myth of the 'good white people' (Sullivan, 2014) and reconstruct how white supremacy benefits white people and has inserted itself into their consciousness.

The book fulfils multiple purposes. It is meant to be a practical guide for educators, leaders and activists rather than a theoretical piece of work. However, the book is also strong on theory. This is no surprise, as Brookfield is the author of *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching* (2004), an impressive tour de force of the critical theory of the main proponents of the Frankfurt School, that substantially expands the scope of traditional critical theory by incorporating Foucault, feminist and critical race theories into a powerfully enhanced theory. One major achievement of *Becoming a white antiracist* is that it compiles fantastic resources that are not limited to the extensive bibliography, but also documentaries, films, memes, social media, podcasts, videos, songs, museums and journalistic resources that are relevant to the topic. There are nine brief video conversations between the authors about major themes from the book that are freely available on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmIdOEBI8dr7QPOWCLGoOeOPSS_iOPHzY). There are also many excellent recommendations of historical books on race and a compelling critique of structural patterns in the vast majority of films out of the predominantly white and male Hollywood film industry:

"The problem is that these represent people of color as being caught in the systems of domination from which they must be rescued by 'good' white people... the hidden 'trick' of these films is to center the experience of a white character, drawing the viewer into once again making whiteness the normative focal point, and subtly nudging viewers toward a view of such liberation as individually produced by a 'white savior'" (p. 79).

Chapter 1 discusses why white antiracism is needed. The authors argue that white people need to understand their collusion in, and enactment of, white supremacy. Like in Brookfield and Associates' *Teaching race* (2018), the term 'white supremacy' is not associated "with the KKK, lynching, cross burning and angry white men carrying Tikki torches, white nationalist militias 'policing' Black Lives Matter demonstrations" (p. 32) or other extreme and violent manifestations in white nationalist groups. The authors use it as referring to the "broadly accepted idea of innate white superiority and the way that outlook legitimizes the continued existence of massive racial disparities" (p. 22). In the authors' usage, white supremacy is about "ensuring that the structural dominance of white people is viewed as unremarkable, normal, and correct" (p. 33).

Racism and white supremacy in the U.S. manifest themselves as de facto resegregation and the school-to-prison pipeline. Chapter 1 contains the following powerful and depressing passage:

[R]edlining mortgage policies ensure that people of color cannot get loans to purchase property in areas that are predominantly white. People of color live in the poorest areas where property taxes are insufficient to fund good schools and proper health care. The higher levels of education correlated with professional jobs are thus closed off, meaning that minimum wage jobs in the service economy are disproportionately filled by people of color. When people of color find themselves in supposedly integrated public schools, the racist stereotype that they are less academic and less intelligent ensures a de facto resegregation, whereby they are much more likely to be automatically placed in groups, classes, and streams that have low academic expectations. Environmental law allows for the dumping of toxic waste in poor areas that are inhabited disproportionately by people of color. The securing in the public mind of the innate criminality of black, brown, and indigenous people means that they are then targeted for arrest and conviction, resulting in the school-to-prison pipeline" (p. 21).

In the U.S., incarceration rates for Black and brown people are astonishingly disproportionate. People of colour are shot by white policemen with depressing regularity. Immigrants are frequently demonised as 'terrorists', 'criminals' and 'rapists'. Given the above, the idea of an equal opportunity seems absurd and can only be maintained by "ideological manipulation" (p. 50).

Chapter 1 is a key section of the book and it makes two more crucial points. First, white people should not only confront racism because it is morally wrong, but also because it is in their own interest, as it helps them preserve their mental health. There are innumerable instances that show over and over again that the concept of white supremacy is fallacious. Thus, maintaining such a counter-factual stance leads to permanent cognitive dissonance. Second, racism is best conceptualized as systemic and structural – securing the continued hegemony of the dominant racial group – rather than an individual prejudice. A key reason why racism is such a difficult topic to discuss is because emotions often fly high. Viewing it as systemic makes it easier to start a conversation.

Chapter 2 clarifies what constitutes a white antiracist identity and also introduces the concept of brave (versus safe) space. Many whites in the U.S. and elsewhere are unaware that whiteness is a "particular racial identity" (p. 28). Whiteness "is conceptualized as the universal and higher end of human development" (p. 28). The idea of whiteness helped justify slavery, as the enslaved were 'subhuman' and 'like animals', an idea that – usually in more subtle forms – lives on in contemporary racism. This idea informed how Christians of all denominations justified slavery. In the history of the U.S., slavery has played an important economic role that has aided in creating the huge economic disparities between people of colour and whites. Whiteness is associated with a structured advantage that has been created through a long history of exclusion and subordination. In that context, the *structural* racism of white people in countries like the USA is quite inevitable. This chapter also makes the critically important point that 'race' as a biologically-determined category that claims mythical innate genetic 'racial differences' is nothing but an illusion. For instance, "the DNA of white Europeans and Black Africans differs in no significantly discernible way" (p. 124). While race is not real and a social construction, it is racism that is very real.

Chapter 3 goes into more detail what it means to be white and argues against a 'colourblind' view of the world. In this context, the term 'white privilege' is helpful. It refers to the absence of the consequences of racism or in other words, the non-existence of penalties that are incurred as a result of somebody's skin colour or phenotype. White privilege means a lack of structural discrimination, not being regarded 'as less' (than white people).

In chapter 4, Brookfield and Hess present a template of how to help white people become aware of their racial identity. They argue that an "antiracist white identity has to be an activist one" (p. 65). In this context, the extremely useful concept of intersectionality is also introduced. In addition to race, intersectionality encompasses considerations of class, gender, sexual orientation and ability. Chapter 5 discusses and exemplifies the use of personal stories and digital narratives in uncovering racism.

Chapter 6 aims to help white people embrace the discomfort of 'race talk' and examine their own white supremacy. The desire of whites to cling on to the self-identification as 'good white people' is what DiAngelo (2018) called 'white fragility' whereby one's emotional equanimity is of foremost concern. Many whites would consider being called a racist

as one of the worst things that could happen to them, due to racism being associated with hate speech and violence against people of colour. When white people realise that they have benefited from racism and that they have been perpetuating it, often in unconscious ways, they usually experience discomfort that can manifest itself in guilt, shame or other powerful emotions. These emotions can be a powerful catalyst for personal transformation.

In the next chapter (7), the authors share their vast knowledge how to run discussions about race. They revisit some of Brookfield's powerful discussion protocols that act as interactive devices: backchannel chat (for instance, via Sli.do), Circle of Voices, Chalk Talk, Circular Response, Bohmian Dialogue and Appreciative Pause. These fabulous discussion and engagement techniques (that I have started to use in my own classes and workshops) have been described in other books by Brookfield (especially: Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; 2016).

In chapter 8, activities such as the white privilege walk and the deconstruction of personal stories are proposed to help us think structurally. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (2000 [1959]) wrote already more than 60 years ago that our private troubles (like getting fired) are always connected to public issues (like the growth of monopoly capitalism). Adopting such systemic thinking takes practice and time.

Chapter 9 is about how teachers and leaders can exercise their own power in a responsible, ethical, and effective manner. This chapter's topic is incidentally closely related to the interview that Brookfield gave us for this issue as well as two other books of his. *The power of critical theory* (2004) is the theoretical part, whereas *Powerful techniques for teaching in lifelong learning* (2013) is the applied, practical part of Brookfield's magisterial reflections on power in and outside the classroom. In the authors' view, it is impossible to be nonracist for whites, but they can be antiracist. This apparent paradox is easily resolved as the inability to be nonracist refers to the kind of depersonalised racism that involves learned ideas and behaviours that have become internalized while growing up. The authors usefully emphasise that the inability to be nonracist as a white person does not constitute a crime and white people "should not feel embarrassed about who they are" (p. 157). If one wants to effect lasting change and transform the power structures in academic institutions, much would need to be addressed: "Hiring policies, reward systems for staff and faculty, admission procedures, the composition of boards of trustees, formats of evaluating learning – all these must place recognizing and challenging racism at their center" (p. 155).

The next chapter (10) is intended to demonstrate how we can draw on the history of antiracist work in becoming an antiracist white. During Trump's presidency, there were efforts to rewrite history by controlling the narrative on race. Conservative U.S. lawmakers have sought to ban or restrict Critical Race Theory from primary and secondary schools in states like Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas. Ex-president Trump felt a need to counter the assertion "that America is a wicked and racist nation" and his National Economic Council director Larry Kudlow "didn't

believe that systemic racism existed in the United States" (both cited in p. 168). The authors make references to some fantastic historical resources that counter revisionist historical narratives that attempt to silence discussions of racism, equality, social justice, and the history of race. It is intriguing how politicised history education is in the U.S. There is obviously a political interest that kids do not read things like the following quote by Robin DiAngelo (2018, p. ix) in their history textbooks:

> [T]he nation began with the attempted genocide of Indigenous people and the theft of their land. American wealth was built on the labor of kidnapped and enslaved Africans and their descendants. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920, and black women were denied access to that right until 1964.

A passage about legal decisions in the U.S. about people of Mexican descent reveals the absurdity of whiteness and race discourses and made me laugh out loud: legal decisions in the U.S. "first declared that people of Mexican descent were white, then were not white, and then again were white" (p. 170).

The penultimate chapter (11) advises readers on the need to understand the institutional contexts and provides some do's and don'ts in responding to resistance. A friend of Brookfield is being quoted: "There are two ways you can do antiracist work – imperfectly or not at all" (p. 192). Conducting classes or training about racism is fraught with many more difficulties than those on most other topics, and 'failing well' (to quote Samuel Beckett) is a positive outcome.

The final chapter (12) discusses what it means to be a white ally and what is problematic about that idea. Virtue signaling is "something you do to make yourself feel better" and is otherwise unhelpful; one also needs to watch out for the "white savior stance" and "optical allyship" (p. 193). According to the authors, genuine ally work is bound to be punished sooner or later:

> You won't be fired outright... But your contract will not be renewed or your duties will be changed. One very predictable response to being perceived as a racial troublemaker is for the organization to pile on new duties and responsibilities so that your time for advocacy is reduced" (pp. 210-211).

In conclusion, the authors again highlight the psychological and mental health benefits in becoming a white antiracist: if you are white, it "is your best hope for the future" (p. 212).

Reading Brookfield's and Hess's writings on race have made me think much more about my own racial identity. Whilst I am most attracted to the holistic concept of intersectionality, I understand that when you stress that term too much – for instance, in a workshop – then one runs the risk of race being sidelined at the expense of especially class and gender.

One possible critique of the book is its strong focus on the USA. Of course, this makes sense as Stephen Brookfield (who was born in England) has lived there for the past 40

years and Mary Hess is U.S.-American anyway. However, this raises the question: can the book's content be applied to other countries? My short answer is 'yes'. *Becoming a white antiracist* is applicable to much of the northern hemisphere in a rather direct way. Most other parts of the world were colonised by white settlers at one time or another. Consequently, white supremacy is a global issue. Whilst racism and white supremacy are two different things, they are inextricably entwined in the USA and in Western Europe. However, I do not think Brookfield and Hess are saying that only white people are capable of racism, as racism is a system of exclusion that is also being practiced by other people.

I have much sympathy for the authors' thesis that "race, especially anti-Blackness, is the biggest unaddressed problem in the U.S." (p. 86). The authors do not intend to generalise this thesis beyond the USA. I would agree that for the two countries that I am most familiar with – Germany and Singapore – things are different. The most discomforting truth to me as a German (and to many fellow Germans) is the racism of the Nazis that led to the devastating Second World War, the Holocaust and horrific euthanasia programmes. The Nazis' racism was not so much focused on black and brown people (who they also regarded as 'subhuman'), but more on Jews, Sinti, Roma and East Europeans. Such racism, though usually in a more subtle form, continues to rear its ugly head in contemporary Germany. While German racism is entwined with white supremacy, the Singaporean case is more radically different from the one in the U.S. Singapore, perhaps also due to its remarkable economic success in the postcolonial era, is one of the world's rare well-functioning multi-cultural states. Singaporeans are quite accepting of other races. Although there may still be some white privilege, there have been recent discussions about 'Chinese privilege', with ethnic Chinese being the city-state's dominant majority. There are instances of colourism, where darker-skinned ethnic Malays and Indians are put at a disadvantage, for instance on the job market. This colourism could be related to the white supremacy during British colonial rule.

Becoming a white antiracist is an important book. It has helped me become much clearer about my own take on racism, starting with the racist beliefs and behaviours that I grew up with in West Germany in the 1960s and '70s that I started to contest as a teenager. Prior to reading the authors' works on racism – that also include The handbook of race and adult education (Sheared et al. (Eds.), 2010) – it was largely a personalised concept for me. I was pretty sure that I was a nonracist, 'good white person', being married to a Singapore Chinese woman, having lived in Southeast Asia for three decades and having friends from many different countries and ethnicities. Brookfield's and Hess's writings rightly emphasise the historical, systemic and endemic character of racism and they have significantly altered my perspective. Amongst other things, I am more sensitised when it comes to racial microaggressions. While we cannot fix everything, there are things that are in our control and we can use our sphere of influence to work for a less racist future. Community-building is a key aspect of such efforts. I am an admirer of the authors' excellent writings that I highly recommend. This thoughtful, well-researched and practical book is a must-read especially for white people.

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