

Explorations in Sights and Sounds

Lewis R. Gordon. *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995) xiv, 222 pp., \$45.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.

In this challenging book, Lewis R. Gordon applies Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of bad faith to anti-Black racism. Gordon argues that bad faith—an individual's attempt to escape personal anguish by choosing to ignore evidence that runs counter to his cherished beliefs—underlies the phenomenon of anti-Black racism. "The Sartrean position raises the question of racism as a form of bad faith since it is a form of evasion of human reality," Gordon writes (92).

A tedious discussion of bad faith occupies the first third of the book. The volume's later parts, however, develop original ideas well worth the effort. At its best, the book courageously takes on the senior and more renowned philosopher Anthony Appiah, broadening our philosophical, as opposed to sociological or psychological, understanding of racism. Because races are social constructions and do not exist in any genetic sense, Appiah concludes that racism, which he says depends upon the false taxonomy of racialism (placing individuals into racial categories), is irrational. Gordon, however, says that there would be no need for racialism if there were no racism. Our society's need for racial categories stems from institutionalized racism.

Gordon also challenges deconstruction and Marxism. He notes the Marxist tenet that racism divides the working class. "Yet, among blacks, it can be argued that the problem with class is that it wrecks black solidarity" (179). By attempting to identify with the white bourgeoisie, affluent Blacks fail to acknowledge their socially inescapable connection to poor blacks. Thus, Gordon boldly asserts, Blacks, too, can fall prey to bad faith by choosing to ignore evidence that their class status does not exempt them from racism.

Because bad faith is a matter of choice, anti-Black racists bear responsibility for their dehumanizing attitudes toward Blacks. This is Gordon's most important conclusion. Whereas Appiah ends up dismissing racism as irrational, Gordon's belief that racism, however ugly, is a choice and therefore rational makes individuals accountable for their bad faith. Although this work deepens our understanding of the nature of anti-Black racism, it does not prescribe action, as Gordon forthrightly acknowledges. Perhaps the book's strides toward the demystification of anti-Black racism are enough for one volume.

Although Gordon's prose mostly avoids jargon, his argumentation demands careful attention. Most readers to whom Sartre is unfamiliar will struggle with the text. Gordon also switches writing styles at various points in the volume as if it were a collection of essays rather than a book-length monograph. The result is at times jarring. The patient reader, however, will be rewarded with Gordon's numerous insights.

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