



Introduction

This book represents a departure from the largely consensual view that the theory of races preceded racism. It also challenges recent revisionist scholarship, which traces the invention of racism back to classical antiquity. It rejects the idea of racism as innate phenomenon shared by all humankind. I argue that particular configurations of racism can only be explained by research into historical conjunctures, which need to be compared and studied in the long term. Racism is relational and changes over time; it cannot be fully understood through the segmented study of short periods of time, specific regions, or well-known victims—for instance, black people or Jews.

The notion of racism I will use in this book—prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action—provides the basis for this long-term approach, enabling us to chart its different forms, continuities, discontinuities, and transformations. I focus my research on the Western world, from the Crusades to the present. Internal ethnic prejudice and discrimination are visible in Europe from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, while the European expansion created a coherent set of ideas and practices concerning hierarchies of peoples from different continents. I do not maintain that the reality of racism is exclusive to this part of the world; Europe simply provides a relatively consistent setting that will be compared to other parts of the world where similar phenomena have manifested themselves.

The book is based largely on the analysis of primary printed and visual sources, which can provide us with new clues to the past, while it benefits from the critical reading of an important and extensive secondary literature on racism carried out in various fields.¹ The main hypothesis guiding my research is that throughout history, racism as prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action has been motivated by political projects.

QUESTIONS

How is it that the same person can be considered black in the United States, colored in the Caribbean or South Africa, and white in Brazil? This question triggered my research on the history of racism twelve years ago. Arbitrariness struck me as the main issue, yet I had been trained to take forms of classification seriously. Classifications can shape human behavior at

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all levels of society. In this case, it seemed obvious that racial classification had an immense power to rank social groups as well as set constraints and possibilities for the population in the countries involved. I consulted the key comparative studies on racism by Pierre van den Berghe, Carl Degler, and George M. Fredrickson.² These works clearly identified common and divergent racial perceptions in the United States and Brazil—an example of divergence being that one drop of African blood defined black people in the United States, while in Brazil middle-class status whitened a person. But I felt that both the historical background and changing forms of classification had not been sufficiently explored. The current contrast between France and the United States is telling: racial classification has officially been abolished by the French, because it is seen as reinforcing racist prejudices, even as in the United States racial classification is part of all bureaucratic inquiries, particularly for people entering the country. Moreover, the noun race has been taken over by African Americans, and reinstated as an expression of collective identity and a political tool against discrimination. The idea of racial classification as a social construct to justify hierarchies and monopolize resources has been turned on its head.

As my work progressed, I realized that the question that had inspired it was based strictly on skin color; it did not include, for instance, Native Americans, whose skin color was arguably similar to many European whites. Again I felt trapped by the tricks of classification. When and how was the idea of red skin invented? How could the contrast between white and black skin be sustained despite all the obvious gradations, both in Europe and Africa? I also realized that racial classification, formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and the United States for scientific purposes, was intended to include all people of the world in a relational, systemic, and hierarchical arrangement. This attempt went well beyond simple variety in skin color. I had to relate precise colonial experiences to this global vision of the peoples of the world. This defined my next set of questions. How were systems of racial classification produced? How did these systems vary in time and place? How far did they shape human action? How were racial classifications influenced by conflict and social interests? How did racial hierarchies reflect prejudices and stimulate discriminatory action?

This list of questions still left gaps in my inquiry. Jews, for example, rarely have been defined by skin color; they were not even included in the main theories of races produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet Jews were the main targets for racial extermination in Nazi Germany. Racism, in light of this devastating case of genocide, cannot be understood within the confines of intellectual history. Instead, political and social practices are crucial. This is why I decided to study racism as ethnic prejudice as well as practice of discrimination and segregation. Racial classification cannot be discarded since it has been used to either legitimize institutional intervention or justify informal action by social groups. Therefore I needed to understand practices, stereotyping, and classificatory ideas as interlinked. Classifications feed on perceptions of other peoples of the world, which must be reconstituted. Next, I enlarged my research to other cases of genocide concerning the Herero in Namibia and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. I realized that different forms of racism emerged in time and place, in relation to specific conjunctures. I had to break away

from a perspective of linear and cumulative racism, which in turn led to the last crucial question: Under what conditions were discrimination and segregation transformed into racial extermination?

INTERPRETATIONS

The idea that the theory of races precedes racism—a relatively consensual view among historians—supposes that the idea of ethnic descent was developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe by the theory of races, which defined a natural division of humankind into subspecies placed in a hierarchy.³ It also argues that the theory of races became a major tool to create and justify discrimination and segregation. This approach considers previous ethnic conflicts to have been caused by religious divides, opposed to a modern, natural divide. Finally, it highlights the historical use of the noun race in contrast with the creation in the twentieth century of the noun racism.

In my view, classification did not precede action. Prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action existed in various periods of history, although I acknowledge the critical impact of the scientific framework provided by the theory of races. Notions of blood and descent already played a central role in medieval forms of collective identification, while the modern ethnic and racial divide was largely inspired by traditional religious antagonism. The theory of races was permeated by conflicting points of view, which is why I will address its subject in the plural. To speak about race before racism means to follow a nominalist approach; Lucien Fèbvre pointed out many years ago that content may exist before the noun that expresses it.⁴ I will discuss the significance of vocabulary and explain my own choices later.

The assumption that racism is a modern phenomenon has recently been challenged.⁵ Benjamin Isaac contests the widely accepted vision established by Frank Snowden that Greeks and Romans had prejudices against barbarians and black people, but that these prejudices were cultural rather than natural.⁶ Barbarians were unable to speak Greek, which meant that they were not aware of the habits, ideas, and rules of behavior established by the Greek. Black people were labeled “burnt faces,” the original meaning of the noun Ethiopian in Greek, but prejudices against skin color, according to Snowden, were not translated into policies of social exclusion. The division between free people and slaves, or between Greeks and barbarians, was more important. Against this vision, Isaac gathers a richly detailed argument for the existence of racism in antiquity. In Isaac’s view, prejudices were produced steadily and spread widely, and were detrimental to their victims. This approach makes the case for rooted prejudices concerning collective descent, yet it fails to demonstrate consistent and systematic discriminatory action—the second crucial element of racism. It has the benefit of showing the importance of prejudices, however, with some of them anticipating ideas that historicists had placed as originating in the eighteenth century. Moreover, such prejudices were unstable, as they were successively applied to different peoples, according

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to changing political conjunctures. Isaac explains how prejudices are shaped by and serve specific interests.

The setting of the history of racism in a historicist (or compartmentalized) framework was decisively challenged by Fredrickson's first general history of racism in the Western world from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century.⁷ This study breaks with an approach that looks at the past in slices, as it establishes connections and avoids anachronism. Fredrickson consistently distinguishes informal racism, as practiced by social groups in everyday life, from institutional racism, backed by the state and transformed into formal policy, as in the southern United States, Germany, and South Africa. He rightly highlights the breakdown of this institutionalized racism between 1945 and 1994, despite the persistence of informal racism. Fredrickson also stresses the medieval and early modern racial gaze, which placed blood and descent at the heart of the main prejudices and discriminatory action, basing these on lineage and genealogical inquiry. But he accepts the mainstream idea that religion was crucial to shaping medieval and early modern prejudices along with discriminatory action, while the scientifically legitimated idea of a natural hierarchy of races influenced modern political action.

In contrast, I contend that the modern realities of racism, particularly against Armenians and Jews, show that the separation between religious and natural hierarchies is much more blurred than generally acknowledged. Furthermore, Fredrickson did not consistently challenge the divide between nature and culture. Claude Lévi-Strauss had formally placed this separation at the center of anthropological study even in his posthumous books on Japan.⁸ In my opinion, the divide is not universal; Japan itself is a country in which the ideal of a symbiosis between nature and culture has always been upheld. It required the thorough and convincing exploration of Peter Wade on race and racism in Latin America to further challenge the traditional division between nature and culture.⁹ But this approach is far from completely accepted.

The main problem with Fredrickson's book is that nearly all references to medieval and early modern history are derivative, thereby creating a schematic and artificial framework. The historical context of prejudices and discriminatory action is not set out convincingly. There is a considerable gap in the book's narrative between the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages, followed by the persecution of New Christians of Jewish descent in Iberia, and then the theories of races in the eighteenth century. The work focuses exclusively on discriminatory action against Jews and black people; Armenians, for instance, are not mentioned. This is an important problem, since prejudices concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action in time developed hierarchies of types of human beings. In my perspective, racism is relational, placing specific groups in contextualized hierarchies according to precise purposes. Finally, Fredrickson fails to address the impact of nationalism on racial theory and racist practices, except to say that racism is generally developed within a national framework. Nationalism is a crucial issue in the long period from the 1840s to 1940s, and this has increasingly brought historians of racism and nationalism into a productive conversation. As we know, the most extreme case of blending nationalism and racism

was presented by Nazi Germany, which made the exclusion of Jewish people into a state policy, but we also need to consider the earlier cases of the Ottoman Empire, which had defined policies to exclude minorities, or Russia, which registered regular pogroms and massive deportations of ethnic/religious populations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This discussion leads to the main interpretative framework applied to racism as historical phenomenon. Many historians, explicitly or implicitly, consider racism to be a phenomenon shared by all humankind that emerges here and there under special circumstances, and is underlined by a natural pride of belonging and rivalry with competitors. This immanent approach regards racism as part of the human condition. Arthur Keith (1866–1955), an anatomist who served as the rector of the University of Aberdeen and president of the Royal Anthropological Institute, considered race and nation as the same, thus equating immanent racism with essentialized national character—an issue I will discuss at the beginning of part III. Keith placed race feeling as “part of the evolutionary machine which safeguards the purity of race; human prejudices have usually a biological significance.”¹⁰ From this vantage point, any history would need to limit itself to a phenomenological approach, since its framework would be provided by natural instincts and competition engendered in the emergence or assertiveness of nations/races. I reject this immanent vision, which is based on neither scientific ground nor historical evidence. I believe we need to investigate the specific circumstances of the emergence of both social practices that exclude targeted groups and racial theories. These practices and theories are not universal, and they do not carry the same configuration through time and place, as the enlargement of my look at China, Japan, and India will show.¹¹

Marxist interpretation relates racism to relations of production. It considers prejudice concerning ethnic descent and discriminatory action as an ideological and political mainstay of the accumulation of capital, keeping wages low and justifying the exploitation of types of human beings considered inferior.¹² This is an intelligent update for modern times of the Aristotelian notion of natural slavery, which justified and created a natural framework for the existence of bound labor. The advantage of this interpretation—its clarity—is exactly its problem: a limited scope and explanatory power. It is strictly linked to economic relations; it contributes to the understanding of colonial and postcolonial aspects of the international division of labor, which maximized profits even as it minimized the costs of both production and political disruption. But it does not provide a global level of explanation. Immanuel Wallerstein, for instance, dismisses Nazi policies to exterminate Jews as irrational, since they do not fit the model of a racialized division of the workforce. Yet it is obvious that there are levels of rationality beyond strictly economic ones.

Political and social approaches provide better interpretative models. In the United States, racism has been analyzed as a political project that created or reproduced structures of domination based on racial categories, which are accepted at face value for structuring institutions and identities right up to the present.¹³ Max Weber approached the problem with subtlety a century ago: he linked racism and racial theories to the monopolization of social power and honor, while he played a part in the exposure of the arbitrariness of racial classification in

his own time.¹⁴ It is the struggle for the monopoly of social power that is at stake with racism and racial theory. Prejudices concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action therefore are linked to political projects, even if they do not always become integrated and institutionalized by the state. These interpretations inspire my hypothesis that racism is triggered by political projects and connected to specific economic conditions. Racism can be fed or deterred by influential powers, and is channeled by a complex web of collective memories and sudden possibilities—a web that can change the forms and targets of racism.

SEMANTICS

The concepts used to analyze racism are themselves the products of history, which is why we need to contextualize them. The nouns racist and racism were created as recently as the 1890s and 1900s in order to designate those promoting racial theory along with a hierarchy of races. The division of humankind into groups of descent that supposedly shared the same physical and mental features was narrowed down to fit specific political contexts. These groups were placed in a relation of superiority or inferiority. In the 1920s and 1930s, the words racist and racism took on the meaning of hostility against racial groups. These linguistic innovations reflected segregationist policies in the southern United States and the development of nationalist movements in Europe based on racial theories—namely, the Nazi rise to power in Germany. The antonyms antiracist and antiracism were coined in the 1930s and 1950s, respectively, to express political protest against racial prejudices, discrimination, and segregation.¹⁵ The unprecedented scale on which racial prejudices had been transformed into political action, resulting in many millions of deaths, was registered after the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War. The discovery of the full extent to which policies of racial extermination had been taken led to the adoption of an antiracism that is now the norm.

While the noun racism thus acquired a precise content, the meaning of the noun race is extremely unstable. The word race started to be used in the Middle Ages as a synonym for caste, and was applied to the raising of plants and breeding of animals. In the late Middle Ages it was used in the definition of noble lineage in Italy and France. During the long Iberian struggle between Muslims and Christians, followed by overseas expansion, race acquired an ethnic meaning—first applied to people of Jewish and Muslim descent, meaning an impurity in the blood, and then applied to Africans and Native Americans. Therefore, the semantic content of the word was developed through a hierarchical ethnic system of classification within the Iberian context. In the eighteenth century, the noun race was used in Europe to denote female gender and, in general, varieties of human beings. Within the theories of races the noun acquired an ambiguous role in labeling subspecies, virtually transformed into species by scientific racialism in the mid-nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as nationalism triumphed in the Western world, the noun race was imposed as equivalent to nation.¹⁶

The extraordinary devastation of the Second World War, which was largely inspired by racial theories, brought the scientific basis of such theories and the very notion of race into question. The debate triggered by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in the late 1940s was not concluded with the mapping and sequencing of the human genome in 2000.¹⁷ Nowadays, scientists question the biological basis of race, since genetic variation within traditionally defined races is larger than between races, but they accept the existence of specific clusters of ethnic dispositions with medical relevance in terms of immunity and exposure to illnesses.¹⁸ In the meantime, as I have already discussed, the noun race has been used by African Americans to express their collective identity and turn the word's original derogatory use on its head. The issue of a "desire" for race has been examined in this political and cultural context.¹⁹ It requires a reevaluation of the notion of identity as a relational perception of belonging that affects individuals, groups, and communities over time as well as across locations, in a permanent process of construction and reconstruction.²⁰ Racism certainly played a role among targeted groups, creating complex cross-references of resistant identities.

The exclusive connection of racism to Europe has been challenged by various studies on China, Japan, and India.²¹ Conflicts between the Tuareg and African ethnicities in the Sahel region of West Africa have recently been interpreted through the idea of race and racial hierarchy, considered to predate the colonial inheritance.²² While the Muslim expansion brought with it ideas of descent shared with Latin Christian peoples, the extension of this approach to analyze the genocide against the Tutsi requires deeper research into local traditions. The risk, here and elsewhere, is in reifying the notion of race.

The instability of the noun race proves that classification reflects historical context rather than defining it. The problem is that the noun race has become too contaminated by the political practices of segregation and extermination to be used by researchers unreflectively. This explains why anthropologists and historians have started to search alternative terms to designate collective groups outside the ideological and anachronistic constraints of racial classification. The noun ethnic has provided an obvious choice, since it was coined in the thirteenth century after the Latin Christian *ethnicus* (pagan or gentile), itself originating from the Greek designation of people, *ethnos* (nation or race).²³ This term promised to combine the notions of a collective identity and "otherness" without being loaded with racial prejudices. The problem raised by anthropologists concerns the risk of essentializing groups that have had fluid borders, and have gone through processes of fragmentation and reorganization. The coining of the noun ethnicity tried to address this notion of fluidity. I will use both ethnic and ethnicity to designate groups that identified themselves by common descent, stressing fluidity and recomposition through the noun ethnicity. In some cases, where recent researchers consider it most appropriate, I will use the noun lineage, such as in West Africa, where kinship played a role in structuring professional groups and traditional polities.

The notion of racism that I will use in this work results from a reflection on historical semantics as well as conceptual developments in the social sciences. Racism attributes a

single set of real or imaginary physical and/or mental features to precise ethnic groups, and believes these features to be transmitted from generation to generation. The ethnic groups are considered inferior or divergent from the norm represented by the reference group, thus justifying discrimination or segregation. Racism targets not only ethnic groups considered inferior but also groups considered competitive, such as Jews, Muslims, or Armenians. The crucial elements of descent, prejudice, and discriminatory action can be found in the past, not only in practices, but in perceptions too: the nouns inferior, prejudice, exclusion, and separation were used in the late Middle Age, while the terms inferiority, stigma, segregation, and discrimination were coined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁴ The issue remains that prejudice related to ethnic descent does not sufficiently identify racism; such prejudice must be coupled with discriminatory action.

Racism distinguishes itself from ethnocentrism in that it does not refer to a disdained or feared neighborhood or distant community in the abstract; it generally targets groups with which the reference community is engaged—groups considered bound to rules of blood or descent. Ethnocentrism can express contempt for another community, yet it accepts the inclusion of individuals from this community, while racism considers that blood affects all members of the targeted community. The notion of ethnocentrism can be extended to cover the rivalry between religious, confessional, or national allegiances, although in some cases the notion of descent is deeply ingrained in the way groups perceive each other.

Genocide is the most recent noun used in this work, meaning the deliberate and systematic extermination (or attempt to exterminate) an ethnic or national group. The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, approved in 1948, defined the phenomenon as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnical, national or religious group.” The acts listed include killing members of the targeted group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life that will bring about the physical destruction of the group, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children from the group to another group.²⁵ We will see how this precise definition covers different cases addressed in part V of this book.

SCOPE

The European expansion provides the framework for my research in time and space. The scope for prejudices concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory actions was radically enlarged by the exploration of other continents; overseas expansion and colonial settlement stimulated the classification of the varieties of human beings that was essential for the definition and justification of hierarchies. This vast movement of populations motivated a new geography, a new cartography, and a new perception of peoples around the world—all measured according to the European yardstick and needs.²⁶ Latin European expansion was renewed with the Crusades. This massive process of conquest and migration

targeted the Holy Land, and was linked to the re-Christianization of Sicily and Iberia. The integration of conquered territories required the inclusion or segregation of, or discrimination against, local populations. The process brought with it old and new perceptions of different peoples, shaping classifications and hierarchies. The first part of my book addresses this process, placed in the wider historical context of classical antiquity, the barbarian invasions, and Muslim expansion, since many prejudices have old roots. The tension between the universalism of the church or empire and local conflicts of interest over subjugation of populations lies at the core of this part, in which I will include European peripheries, relating internal to external colonialism.

The European overseas expansion, marked by the voyages of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) to America and Vasco da Gama (1469–1524) to India in the last decade of the fifteenth century, represented a long-term process that allowed for the exploration of new seas, lands, skies, and varieties of human beings. Cartography shifted its center from Jerusalem to Europe, thereby symbolizing the new assertion of the old continent in relation to Asia and Africa as well as the New World. The myth of continents, already built up in the Greek and Roman world, was followed by the personification of those continents, bestowing on them attributes that configured a hierarchy of peoples globally. This momentous assertion of Europe during the sixteenth century would have major consequences in the long run, since it supplied the template for data collection about geography, the economy, and natural history. The second part of this study analyzes the early modern European vision of people and humankind, showing the importance of the notion of the purity of blood in Iberia, following the medieval perceptions of Jews and Muslims. It also studies perceptions and stereotyping related to Africans, Asians, Americans, and Europeans, because they expressed political projects of expansion and influenced classifications used in the theories of races.

The third part of the book discusses colonial societies from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, analyzing the concrete processes of conquest, transfers of population, and the construction of new societies defined by white supremacy. It studies the classification of people emerging from local and regional conditions, in which the debasement of inferior *castas* in the Iberian world could reach a level of dehumanization via animal metaphors transferred to northern European colonial cultures. I will link forms of classification and ethnic structure in order to show the interdependent dynamic between social practice and taxonomy. This part explores the role of political projects, central and local policies, institutionalized discrimination and segregation, and the convergence and divergence of practices between the major European colonial powers—Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, and Netherlands. The slave trade, slavery, and Native resistance lie at the core of this analysis; the uniqueness of the American case will be compared with the European presence in Asia. As slavery shaped American colonial societies so prominently, I will look at abolitionism, its possible impact on the late eighteenth-century notion of human rights, and its relationship to prejudices concerning descent.

The fourth part scrutinizes theories of races along with their impact on societies and policies from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. This part is necessarily connected to

the history of ideas and history of science; the main characteristics of the theories of races from Carl Linnaeus to Houston Stewart Chamberlain are discussed. I highlight the first stage of the classification of varieties of human beings underpinned by the work of Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, Immanuel Kant, Petrus Camper, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Georges Cuvier, James Cowles Prichard, and Alexander von Humboldt. The focus will be on different perceptions and the significance of key debates in which the instability of conceptual trends as well as doubts related to the definition of boundaries between races became obvious. The study of scientific racialism in the mid-nineteenth century allows us to see forms of classification as interlinked with political struggle—in this case, the growing tension between the northern and southern United States, expressed by the opposed policies of free and slave soil, which would lead to the Civil War. By looking at Charles Darwin in particular, I will show how the notion of evolution rendered the clash between monogenists (defenders of one single Creation) and polygenists (defenders of multiple Creations) outdated, only to be immediately converted into a system of ideas about social evolution and a hierarchical vision of the different stages of humankind.

The fifth part concerns the development of racial policies in specific countries from the late nineteenth century onward. A survey of policies of exclusion and extermination implemented in Europe under the late Ottoman Empire and in Nazi Germany will allow me to reflect on the impact of nationalism along with its fusion with notions of race, which proved to be lethal in these contexts. I will also analyze the reappearance on a massive scale of forced labor and slavery in 1930s' Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as well as the deportation of whole populations. The final chapter is one of comparisons. It addresses European forms of racism after the Second World War, segregation policies in the United States up to the campaign for civil rights, the acts of genocide against the Herero in Namibia in 1904 and the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, and the emergence and decline of apartheid in South Africa. I end by considering the long-term phenomenon of prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action in three Asian countries that were not extensively touched by the European expansion until the nineteenth century: China, Japan, and India.

This book reconstitutes prejudices around ethnic descent because they provide the context for the emergence of racist action. When examining specific authors, I do not imply that they were necessarily racist. In many cases they engaged in stereotyping, debated prejudices, or introduced complexity into the perceptions of varieties of human beings; in other instances, they were involved in the theories of races but not in discriminatory action. This explains why I have tried to strike a balance between the analysis of ethnic prejudices and discriminatory action; the former were clearly more fluid and present than the latter, but discrimination could not be implemented without a context of prejudice.

The problems associated with massive migration, the integration of minorities, and relations between civilizations are far from solved in this world. As Marc Bloch said, we need to study the past in order to understand the present and prepare the future.²⁷ My hope is that rigorous historical analysis can contribute to ending the history of racism, which this book is about.