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George M. Fredrickson: Racism: A Short History

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The term “racism” is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or “people” toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes. But sometimes the antipathy of one group toward another is expressed and acted upon with a single-mindedness and brutality that go far beyond the group-centered prejudice and snobbery that seem to constitute an almost universal human failing. Hitler invoked racist theories to justify his genocidal treatment of European Jewry, as did white supremacists in the American South to explain why Jim Crow laws were needed to keep whites and blacks separated and unequal.

The climax of the history of racism came in the twentieth century in the rise and fall of what I will call “overtly racist regimes.” In the American South, the passage of segregation laws and restrictions on black voting rights reduced African Americans to lower-caste status, despite the constitutional amendments that had made them equal citizens. Extreme racist propaganda, which represented black males as ravening beasts lusting after white women, served

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to rationalize the practice of lynching. These extralegal executions were increasingly reserved for blacks accused of offenses against the color line, and they became more brutal and sadistic as time went on; by the early twentieth century victims were likely to be tortured to death rather than simply killed. A key feature of the racist regime maintained by state law in the South was a fear of sexual contamination through rape or intermarriage, which led to efforts to prevent the conjugal union of whites with those with any known or discernible African ancestry.

The effort to guarantee “race purity” in the American South anticipated aspects of the official Nazi persecution of Jews in the 1930s. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 prohibited intermarriage or sexual relations between Jews and gentiles, and the propaganda surrounding the legislation emphasized the sexual threat that predatory Jewish males presented to German womanhood and the purity of German blood. Racist ideology was of course eventually carried to a more extreme point in Nazi Germany than in the American South of the Jim Crow era. Individual blacks had been hanged or burned to death by the lynch mobs to serve as examples to ensure that the mass of southern African Americans would scrupulously respect the color line. But it took Hitler and the Nazis to attempt the extermination of an entire ethnic group on the basis of a racist ideology.

Hitler, it has been said, gave racism a bad name. The moral revulsion of people throughout the world against what the Nazis did, reinforced by scientific studies undermining racist genetics (or eugenics), served to discredit the scientific racism that had been respectable and influential in the United States and Europe before the Second

World War. But explicit racism also came under devastating attack by the new nations resulting from the decolonization of Africa and Asia and their representatives in the United Nations. The civil rights movement in the United States, which succeeded in outlawing legalized racial segregation and discrimination in the 1960s, was a beneficiary of revulsion against the Holocaust as the logical extreme of racism. But it also drew crucial support from the growing sense that national interests were threatened when blacks in the United States were mistreated and abused. In the competition with the Soviet Union for “the hearts and minds” of independent Africans and Asians, Jim Crow and the ideology that sustained it became a national embarrassment with possible strategic consequences.

The one racist regime that survived the Second World War and the Cold War was the South African, which did not in fact come to fruition until the advent of apartheid in 1948. The laws passed banning all marriage and sexual relations between different “population groups” and requiring separate residential areas for people of mixed race (“Coloreds”), as well as for Africans, signified the same obsession with “race purity” that characterized the other racist regimes. However, the climate of world opinion in the wake of the Holocaust induced some apologists for apartheid to avoid straightforward biological racism and to rest their case for “separate development” mainly on cultural rather than physical differences. The extent to which Afrikaner nationalism was inspired by nineteenth-century European cultural nationalism also contributed to this avoidance of a pseudoscientific rationale. No better example can be found of how a “cultural essentialism” based on nation-

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ality can do the work of a racism based squarely on skin color or other physical characteristics. The South African government also tried to accommodate itself to the age of decolonization. It offered a dubious independence to the overcrowded “homelands,” from which African migrants went forth to work for limited periods in the mines and factories of the nine-tenths of the country reserved for a white minority that constituted less than a sixth of the total population.

The defeat of Nazi Germany, the desegregation of the American South in the 1960s, and the establishment of majority rule in South Africa suggest that regimes based on biological racism or its cultural essentialist equivalent are a thing of the past. But racism does not require the full and explicit support of the state and the law. Nor does it require an ideology centered on the concept of biological inequality. Discrimination by institutions and individuals against those perceived as racially different can long persist and even flourish under the illusion of nonracism, as recent students of Brazilian race relations have discovered.¹ The use of allegedly deep-seated cultural differences as a justification for hostility and discrimination against newcomers from the Third World in several European countries has led to allegations of a new “cultural racism.” Similarly, those sympathetic to the plight of poor African Americans and Latinos in the United States have described as “racist” the view of some whites that many denizens of the ghettos and barrios can be written off as incurably infected by cultural pathologies. From the historian’s perspective such recent examples of cultural determinism are not in fact unprecedented. They rather represent a reversion to the way that

the differences between ethnoracial groups could be made to seem indelible and unbridgeable before the articulation of a scientific or naturalistic conception of race in the eighteenth century.

The aim of this book is to present in a concise fashion the story of racism's rise and decline (although not yet, unfortunately, its fall) from the Middle Ages to the present. To achieve this, I have tried to give racism a more precise definition than mere ethnocentric dislike and distrust of the Other. The word "racism" first came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews. As is the case with many of the terms historians use, the phenomenon existed before the coinage of the word that we use to describe it. But our understanding of what beliefs and behaviors are to be considered "racist" has been unstable. Somewhere between the view that racism is a peculiar modern idea without much historical precedent and the notion that it is simply a manifestation of the ancient phenomenon of tribalism or xenophobia may lie a working definition that covers more than scientific or biological racism but less than the kind of group prejudice based on culture, religion, or simply a sense of family or kinship.²

It is when differences that might otherwise be considered ethnocultural are regarded as innate, indelible, and unchangeable that a racist attitude or ideology can be said to exist. It finds its clearest expression when the kind of ethnic differences that are firmly rooted in language, customs, and kinship are overridden in the name of an imagined collectivity based on pigmentation, as in white supremacy, or on a

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linguistically based myth of remote descent from a superior race, as in Aryanism. But racism as I conceive it is not merely an attitude or set of beliefs; it also expresses itself in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates. Racism, therefore, is more than theorizing about human differences or thinking badly of a group over which one has no control. It either directly sustains or proposes to establish a *racial order*, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of God. Racism in this sense is neither a given of human social existence, a universal “consciousness of kind,” nor simply a modern theory that biology determines history and culture. Like the modern scientific racism that is one expression of it, it has a historical trajectory and is mainly, if not exclusively, a product of the West. But it originated in at least a prototypical form in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries rather than in the eighteenth or nineteenth (as is sometimes maintained) and was originally articulated in the idioms of religion more than in those of natural science.

Racism is therefore not merely “xenophobia”—a term invented by the ancient Greeks to describe a reflexive feeling of hostility to the stranger or Other. Xenophobia may be a starting point upon which racism can be constructed, but it is not the thing itself. For an understanding of the emergence of Western racism in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, a clear distinction between racism and religious intolerance is crucial. The religious bigot condemns and persecutes others for what they believe, not for what they intrinsically are. I would not therefore consider the sincere missionary, who may despise the beliefs and

habits of the object of his or her ministrations, to be a racist. If a heathen can be redeemed through baptism, or if an ethnic stranger can be assimilated into the tribe or the culture in such a way that his or her origins cease to matter in any significant way, we are in the presence of an attitude that often creates conflict and misery, but not one that should be labeled racist. It might be useful to have another term, such as “culturalism,” to describe an inability or unwillingness to tolerate cultural differences, but if assimilation were genuinely on offer, I would withhold the “R” word. Even if a group—for example, Muslims in the Ottoman Empire or Christians in early medieval Europe—is privileged in the eyes of the secular and religious authorities, racism is not operative if members of stigmatized groups can voluntarily change their identities and advance to positions of prominence and prestige within the dominant group. Examples would include the medieval bishops who had converted from Judaism and the Ottoman generals who had been born Christian. (Of course mobility may also be impeded by barriers of “caste” or “estate” that differentiate on a basis other than membership in a collectivity that thinks of itself, or is thought of by others, to constitute a distinctive “people,” or “ethnos.”)

Admittedly, however, there is a substantial gray area between racism and “culturalism.” One has to distinguish among differing conceptions of culture. If we think of culture as historically constructed, fluid, variable in time and space, and adaptable to changing circumstances, it is a concept antithetical to that of race. But culture can be reified and essentialized to the point where it becomes the functional equivalent of race. Peoples or ethnic groups can be

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endowed with national souls or *Volksgeister*, which, rather than being inherited by any observable biological or genetic process, are passed on from generation to generation by some mysterious or even supernatural means, a kind of recurring gift from God. The long-standing European belief that children had the same “blood” as their parents was more metaphor and myth than empirical science, but it sanctioned a kind of genealogical determinism that could turn racial when applied to entire ethnic groups.³

Deterministic cultural particularism can do the work of biological racism quite effectively, as we shall see in more detail in later discussions of *völkisch* nationalism in Germany and South Africa. Contemporary British sociologists have identified and analyzed what they call “the new cultural racism.” John Solomos and Les Back argue, for example, that race is now “coded as culture,” that “the central feature of these processes is that the qualities of social groups are fixed, made natural, confined within a pseudo-biologically defined culturalism.” Racism is therefore “a scavenger ideology, which gains its power from its ability to pick out and utilize ideas and values from other sets of ideas and beliefs in specific socio-historical contexts.” But there are also “strong continuities in the articulation of the images of the ‘other,’ as well as in the images which are evident in the ways in which racist movements define the boundaries of ‘race’ and ‘nation.’”⁴ These continuities suggest to me that there is a general history of racism, as well as a history of particular racisms, but knowledge of specific contexts is necessary to an understanding of the varying forms and functions of the generic phenomenon with which we are concerned.

My theory or conception of racism, therefore, has two components: *difference* and *power*. It originates from a mindset that regards “them” as different from “us” in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable. This sense of difference provides a motive or rationale for using our power advantage to treat the ethnoracial Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members of our own group. The possible consequences of this nexus of attitude and action range from unofficial but pervasive social discrimination at one end of the spectrum to genocide at the other, with government-sanctioned segregation, colonial subjugation, exclusion, forced deportation (or “ethnic cleansing”), and enslavement among the other variations on the theme. In all manifestations of racism from the mildest to the most severe, what is being denied is the possibility that the racializers and the racialized can coexist in the same society, except perhaps on the basis of domination and subordination. Also rejected is any notion that individuals can obliterate ethnoracial difference by changing their identities.

The French sociologist Pierre-André Taguieff has distinguished between two distinctive varieties or “logics” of racism—“le racisme d’exploitation” and “le racisme d’extermination.”⁵ One might also call the two possibilities the racism of inclusion and the racism of exclusion. Both are racist because the inclusionary variant permits incorporation only on the basis of a rigid hierarchy justified by a belief in permanent, unbridgeable differences between the associated groups, while the exclusionary type goes further and finds no way at all that the groups can coexist in the same society. The former would obviously apply most

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readily to white supremacy and the latter to antisemitism. But historical reality is too messy to enable us to use these dichotomies consistently in a group-specific way. For long periods in European history, Jews were tolerated so long as they stayed in “their place” (the ghetto), whereas African Americans migrating to the northern states during the era of slavery and afterward often found themselves exposed to what the psychologist Joel Kovel has called “aversive racism” to distinguish it from the “dominative” variety that he finds ascendant in the South.⁶ Antebellum “black laws” forbidding the immigration of free African Americans into several Midwestern states were conspicuous examples of aversive racism, as were the various schemes for colonizing blacks outside of the United States. Depending on the circumstances of the dominant group, and what uses, if any, it has for the subalterns, the logic of racism can shift from inclusionary to exclusionary and vice versa.

My conception may at first seem too broad to have the historical specificity that I promised to give it. It is possible that relations among peoples before the late Middle Ages were sometimes characterized by the kind of hostility and exclusiveness that betokens racism. But it was more common, if not universal, to assimilate strangers into the tribe or nation, if they were willing to be so incorporated. There might be non-Western forms of prejudice and ethnocentrism that would be hard to exclude under the terms of my definition. The traditional belief of the Japanese that only people of their own stock can truly understand and appreciate their culture, with the resulting discrimination against Japanese-born Koreans, might be an example.⁷ Another might be the feudal-type hegemony exercised by the ethni-

cally distinct Tutsi herdsmen over the Hutu agriculturalists in Rwanda and Burundi before colonization.⁸ But I will concentrate on racism in Europe and its colonial extensions since the fifteenth century for several reasons. First, even if it has existed elsewhere in rudimentary form, the virus of racism did not infect Europe itself prior to the period between the late medieval and early modern periods. Hence we can study its emergence in a time and place for which we have a substantial historical record. Second, the varieties of racism that developed in the West had greater impact on world history than any functional equivalent that we might detect in another era or part of the world. Third, the logic of racism was fully worked out, elaborately implemented, and carried to its ultimate extremes in the West, while at the same time being identified, condemned, and resisted from within the same cultural tradition.

What makes Western racism so autonomous and conspicuous in world history has been that it developed in a context that presumed human equality of some kind. First came the doctrine that the Crucifixion offered grace to all willing to receive it and made all Christian believers equal before God. Later came the more revolutionary concept that all “men” are born free and equal and entitled to equal rights in society and government. If a culture holds a premise of spiritual and temporal *inequality*, if a hierarchy exists that is unquestioned even by its lower-ranking members, as in the Indian caste system before the modern era, there is no incentive to deny the full humanity of underlings in order to treat them as impure or unworthy. If equality is the norm in the spiritual or temporal realms (or in both at the same time), and there are groups of people within the

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society who are so despised or disparaged that the upholders of the norms feel compelled to make them exceptions to the promise or realization of equality, they can be denied the prospect of equal status only if they allegedly possess some extraordinary deficiency that makes them less than fully human. It is uniquely in the West that we find the dialectical interaction between a premise of equality and an intense prejudice toward certain groups that would seem to be a precondition for the full flowering of racism as an ideology or worldview.

Writing an overview of the history of Western racism is possible because of the labors of many historians who have worked on particular aspects of the question. My endeavor is inevitably an attempt at synthesis, although a portion of the scholarship I will be synthesizing is the product of my own original research. Readers interested in placing this work in a fuller scholarly (and autobiographical) context might at this point turn to the appendix, which traces the career of the concept of racism in historical discourse since the term (or its near equivalent) was first used in the 1920s. I pay particular attention there to how investigations of antisemitism and white supremacy have, for the most part, gone their separate ways. In the main body of the book I attempt an extensive comparison of the historical development over the past six centuries of these two most prominent expressions of Western racism. (To my knowledge no one has previously attempted such a study.) Chapter 1 deals with the segue between the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages and the nascent racism of the Age of Discovery and the Renaissance. Particular attention is paid in this chapter to Spain, the first great colonizing nation and

a seedbed for Western attitudes toward race. The second chapter concerns the rise of modern racist ideologies, especially white supremacy and antisemitism, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It concludes with a comparison of the rise—in response to “emancipation” as prospect or reality—of antiblack racism in the United States and racial antisemitism in Germany. The final chapter is mainly an examination in the context of world history of the rise and fall of the “overtly racist regimes” of the twentieth century—the American South in the Jim Crow era, Nazi Germany, and South Africa under apartheid. The epilogue speculates on the probable fate of racism in the new century that is upon us.