



Racism: A Short History

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Are antisemitism and white supremacy manifestations of a general phenomenon? Why didn't racism appear in Europe before the fourteenth century, and why did it flourish as never before in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Why did the twentieth century see institutionalized racism in its most extreme forms? Why are egalitarian societies particularly susceptible to virulent racism? What do apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany, and the American South under Jim Crow have in common? How did the Holocaust advance civil rights in the United States?

With a rare blend of learning, economy, and cutting insight, George Fredrickson surveys the history of Western racism from its emergence in the late Middle Ages to the present. Beginning with the medieval antisemitism that put Jews beyond the pale of humanity, he traces the spread of racist thinking in the wake of European expansionism and the beginnings of the African slave trade. And he examines how the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century romantic nationalism created a new intellectual context for debates over slavery and Jewish emancipation.

Fredrickson then makes the first sustained comparison between the color-coded racism of nineteenth-century America and the antisemitic racism that appeared in Germany around the same time. He finds similarity enough to justify the common label but also major differences in the nature and functions of the stereotypes invoked. The book concludes with a provocative account of the rise and decline of the twentieth century's overtly racist regimes--the Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa--in the context of world historical developments.

This illuminating work is the first to treat racism across such a sweep of history and geography. It is distinguished not only by its original comparison of modern racism's two most significant varieties--white supremacy and antisemitism--but also by its eminent readability.

Racism: A Short History Details

Date : Published July 22nd 2003 by Princeton University Press (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780691116525

Author : George M. Fredrickson

Format : Paperback 207 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Race, Sociology, Academic, College, Read For School

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Suzanned99 says

This book was a good overview of racism and its origins. It seems to concentrate on state sanctioned racism, where laws are created that dictate who can marry whom, where people can live, what jobs they can have.

I learned that racism started with discriminating against Jews.

Joshua Lawson says

What is racism? When did it first appear in human history? What forms has it taken throughout the world? These are the general questions George Fredrickson attempts to answer in *Racism: A Short History*. This was my exposure to scholarly literature dealing with the concept of race, and it helped me see how the idea has been and is being engaged by social scientists and historians. I look forward to reading more from Fredrickson and others in his field as I attempt to put the pieces together for myself.

Miss says

I had to read this book for an university-course and I thought it presented a good overview of where racist thoughts and ideologies come from, how they slowly evolved to legitimize certain hierarchies. From all the definitions I have read of the word "racism" I must say that I agree with Fredrickson's definition the most because it covers all the important areas and cuts out discrimination concerning things other than race or ethnicity. I also think it's important to emphasize openly racist regimes and show how racism slowly can become an ideology with the help of science, religion and myths. I also agree with Fredrickson's assessment of the possible future forms of racism: it's going to be religious racism on a large scale. On a small scale you will always have racism left, however enlightened a society is. But the big racism-issue is going to be about religion and it probably won't occur in Western Europe.

One thing I have been wondering about is why Fredrickson doesn't mention ancient Greece as some kind of proto-racism. They had slaves, they had certain ideas about why there are different races and they were convinced that race /ethnicity is unchangable and as much connected to inner qualities as to appearance. So I think that this book presents a good overview about the history of racism. It of course doesn't show any theories in depth but it's a good start for someone who wants to scientifically dive into the topic.

todd says

As the title indicates, a *short* history. The parallels Fredrickson draws between color-coded racism and antisemitism are interesting but ultimately not very illuminating. As Fredrickson himself admits in the text, the differences between the two are often greater than the similarities.

Nevertheless, the book does much to arrive at a clearer definition of a frequently misused or sloppily-applied term: racism. It also serves as a decent sketch outline of the emergence of racism as a historical phenomenon. Fredrickson conscientiously points out areas of controversy and is generous in his recommendations for further reading.

Those looking for in-depth analysis or commentary on topics salient to ongoing or emerging debates; e.g., structural racism, intersectionality, etc., will come away disappointed. Fredrickson mentions them only cursorily.

Erin Casey says

As someone who does not have an extensive historical knowledge, this book was difficult to read at times. However, the way Fredrickson presents his ideas are quite thought-provoking. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who may not believe racism is still a societal issue, or for people who wish to have a greater knowledge and another resource in their toolbelt of academic opinion.

Lock says

I got pretty sucked into this one. While I had read accounts of the separate development of antisemitism and white supremacy, I hadn't encountered a study that so thoroughly and consistently related them to one another, crafting a single historical narrative and detailing the religious, philosophical, and "scientific" interplay between the two tendencies. Does a good job of creating and utilizing a specific taxonomy of racist societies and regimes; very useful. The style is pretty dry, typical academic fare, but without drowning the reader in specifics. A criticism I would present is that Frederickson neglects the economic and political motives in the establishment of African slavery in the British American colonial period. I recognize that the scope of the book is the development, climax, and defeat of his "overtly racist regimes," I feel like the roots of white supremacy in the states bear description, are important to frame in this kind of thing. While he does a great job of describing the ways in which the kind of dehumanization that characterizes antisemitism and white supremacy are possible, he talks less about the motives of the regimes in question for codifying racist power dynamics. In short, its a study focusing on the pathology of racism.

Derek says

Not quite what I expected it to be, this book defined racism much more narrowly than is typical in public discourse—a system in which a hierarchy is created between different groups by official means (i.e., laws and acts of government), in which groups are disadvantaged over characteristics which are considered immutable and unchanging. It's a thought-provoking and potentially useful definition for a term typically used in much broader, more vague senses, senses in which the author suggests that "xenophobia" is a more accurate term. As such, the book claims that the term really only applies to a few specific instances of history: primarily the US South up until the civil rights era, Germany from the nineteenth century to the end of WWII, and South Africa. I'm not necessarily convinced that this isn't overly restrictive; from my admittedly minor knowledge of the situation in the British Isles, I think one might argue what the Irish of the prior few centuries were subjected to racism by the definition of the book, and that there were examples in Asia as well, such as the Japanese with the Koreans.

The exploration of the origins and nature of bigotry against Africans and Jews was very interesting. While I'm still interested in reading more in depth on the topic, the book provided some insights into the origins of Africans as the primary victims of the slave trade in the last three centuries. Interesting to see how that fact, and some of the rationalizations for that came via Islamic cultures.

Also very interesting to learn of the peculiar nature of antisemitism in Germany. I hadn't been aware how the unique history of Germany made it a particularly fertile ground for the racism that lead ultimately to the holocaust. There was also a very interesting, of brief, exploration of how much culpability for the holocaust must be shared by Germany in general rather than just the maxi leaders.

An interesting (and, given the seeming rise of at least a strain of xenophobia in US and world politics, perhaps very timely) read.

Melissa says

Great overview of the history of racism in western culture. A bit more academic in reading - made it harder to read casually.

Chris says

For its length, I think this book does an excellent job of examining the history of "race" and "racism." It takes the approach of explaining racism as a modern "invention", rather than viewing it as an anthropological or psychological phenomenon. From the other literature I've read on the topic, this viewpoint is widely accepted in the academic community, and the historical record itself is very compelling to this point. The book begins with a description of events just prior to the "Limpieza de Sangre" campaign in 15th century Spain, and charts the evolution of xenophobia into its dastardly and all-too-familiar relative.

Definitely worth a read. Be warned: very dense, although necessarily so.

Paul says

A comparative history of anti-Semitism and racism. Once the bibliography and appendix are taken out, it really is a "Short History" of racism, and I wouldn't have minded a bit more space to explore some of the arguments in a bit more detail as some generalisations creep in which I would rather were examined more closely.

Drick says

This author takes a close look at three historical instances of racism: The American South, Nazi Germany and the apartheid regime of South Africa. Through a discussion of these three he develops a framework for identifying racism vs. culturalism or generally xenophobia. While I found his historical overview interesting, I sensed an underlying assumption that racism was rational decision. He did not account much for the non-rational aspects of racism: fear of the "other," identity insecurity, self-loathing, etc. As such I was left feeling something significant was missing.

The other major shortcoming is that Fredrickson tells the history from the dominant culture point of view, rarely drawing on sources from the oppressed. he quote Dubois a couple of times but other than that all his sources were white European.

Finally, by only focusing on the three instances of historic racism, he overlooks other examples: American Indians, Chinese and Japanese and other racial/ethnic groups that were equally victims organized racism. Fredrickson so narrowly defines racism to exclude these groups

However what was helpful was to see how "racism" went from being an acceptable scientific term in dominant society to being a negative term after the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. He also forces us to reckon with the fact that white history has justified racism for a long time, and only in the last 60 years has begun to really turn this around. He also helps us see the interplay of law and behavior, even though he has largely omitted the emotional and psychological.

Brent says

Fredrickson's definition includes "difference and power" as the major components of racism (p. 9). He argues that anything that lacks one or the other of these characteristics, however negative, could be called culturalism or prejudice but it would not be racism. He also argues that if the characteristics that elicit prejudice are not genetic and one is able to move from the persecuted group to the dominant group through any means, then it is also not truly racism. With this definition in mind Fredrickson goes on to provide a brief overview of racism in Western society. His overview primarily focuses on the grand scale of politics, religion, and laws associated with racial relations. He omits personal stories, and ground level impacts of racism in favor of understanding the long historical story of racism.

Fredrickson's approach of looking at history from a broad, overarching scale offers a full picture, but it does so with the sacrifice of much detail. In the American context, this text leaves a great deal of the United States' racial story untold. Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and many other racial groups were practically disregarded in this book. This is not necessarily a limit of historical studies in general, but it is a criticism of Fredrickson's broad historical approach.

Robin says

Fredrickson brilliantly breaks down the history of racism, from its arrival in the modern world in Spain to the current struggles of African-Americans. In its early days, many used racism as a justification for slavery. The Curse of Ham, was a story tarnished skin taken from the old testament and randomly applied to the people of West Africa.

Fredrickson separates two kinds of racism, that of White Supremacy (inclusion) and of Antisemitism (exclusion). He details how these grew over time from the pogroms of the 12th and 13th century, to the 'limpieza de sangre' towards moriscos and conversos in 16th century Spain, to the popular science of Eugenics (starting in England and then spreading the US and Germany). Fredrickson demonstrates how the rise of German Nationalism contributed to the rise of exclusionist policies and eventually to the racism of the Third Reich.

The ideology of social Darwinism spread across the world in 18th and 19 centuries and its effect on modern society is still seen today.

Regina says

Not sure if I agree with everything in this book but it is incredibly well written, thoughtful and even creative. Basic idea is that overt racist regimes appeared and disappeared in the 20th century. The most extreme examples include: Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany and S. African Apartheid. Interesting ideas about link between modernity, rationality and racism.

Jon says

A lot has been written about European anti-Semitism and American White Supremacism, but a comparative study of racism which takes into account both of its dominant manifestations is rare to find. Fredrickson's book manages to fill this gap by developing a conceptual framework of racism based on a comparison of Jim Crow America, Nazi Germany, and Apartheid South Africa. As a result, this book is more insightful and valuable than most works that dealt just with nation-specific manifestations of racism.

Refreshingly, Fredrickson also refrains from political rhetoric or blame-centered approaches, since, as he puts it:

"The responsibility of the historian or sociologist who studies racism is not to moralize and condemn but to understand this malignancy so that it can be more effectively treated, just as a medical researcher studying cancer does not moralize about it but searches for knowledge that might point the way to a cure."

With its concise form and clear language, "Racism: A Short History" also makes for a great introduction to the issue.
