

significance commands attention from the academic and civic communities.

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Racism

A Short History

By George M. Fredrickson

(Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2002. Pp. x, 207. Appendix, notes, index. Paperbound, \$14.95.)

In this sweeping, provocative book, George Fredrickson explores the development of racism and anti-Semitism from the Middle Ages to the present. For Fredrickson, the term racism has become so “loaded and ambiguous” that he has taken it as his duty to historicize the term, to explain the way people have thought about race and used it to construct social and cultural hierarchies over the last millennium (p. 151). Racism, in Fredrickson’s view, is not just prejudice—an attitude or set of beliefs—but involves the creation and use of practices, institutions, and structures that allow a dominant group to establish a racial order that they believe reflects the law of nature or God’s will.

To make his case about what racism means and how it developed, Fredrickson divides his book into three chapters. The first covers the long span from the Middle Ages to the start of the eighteenth century. Particularly in the earlier part of that era, most Europeans worried more about people’s religious beliefs than about their skin color or Judaic ances-

try. Being black or Jewish might mark a person as inferior, but it was an inferiority that could be rectified by conversion to Christianity. Racism did not flourish because there was not yet an ideology that led people to see race as inherent and unalterable.

That essentialist ideology developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rise of what Fredrickson in chapter two calls “modern racism” (p. 49). In one of the West’s greatest paradoxes, the Enlightenment and racism grew together. This was no mere coincidence, but instead revealed the Janus-faced nature of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, this system of rational thinking subverted old hierarchies based on “faith, superstition, and prejudice.” On the other hand, it created new inequalities based on “reason, science, and history” (p. 63). Science, starting with the work of Linnaeus in 1735, began ranking the human species with “acute, inventive” Europeans at the top and “crafty, indolent” blacks and unscrupulous, clannish Jews at the bottom (p. 56).

This new vision led dominant groups in Germany, the United States, and South Africa to believe their societies would only survive if they created “racist regimes” (pp. 100-101). These regimes, which Fredrickson analyzes in chapter three, had several features that distinguished them from earlier racist societies: they employed explicitly racist official ideologies; they forbade interracial marriage; they mandated social segregation by law; they excluded the subordinate group from formal political participation; and they forced the oppressed into poverty. Nazi Germany, the Jim Crow South, and apartheid South Africa implemented all of these rules and thus represented the climax of racism in the Western world. None of these regimes survived World War II and the Cold War—a fact that, in Fredrickson’s view, offers little solace. In the future, he argues in an absorbing epilogue, new systems of domination may arise based on religion rather than race.

This is a powerful book, one that only a scholar with decades of experience could have written. While Fredrickson supplies little new research, he draws on the historiography of three nations and the newest theories of racial formation to make his case. His synthesis offers new ways of thinking about racism in a broad temporal and geographic context, forcing us to think beyond national boundaries and narrow time frames. It also shows how racism and anti-Semitism create analogous if not identical systems of oppression. In all, this is a crucial book for anyone who wants to make sense of the way racism has developed in the Western world.

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