

The Origins of Racism in the West

Review Number: 887

Publish date: Thursday, 1 April, 2010

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ISBN: 9780521888554

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £55.00

Pages: 348pp.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Panikos Panayi

In 1994 I published a now widely cited and highly regarded volume entitled *Immigration, Ethnicity and Racism in Britain, 1815–1914* (1), which, at the time, faced critical comment. One of the phrases which received particular attention consisted of the opening to chapter five (entitled ‘Racism’), which began: ‘All minorities in all societies in all historical periods have endured hostility from the government and the majority populations in the countries in which they live’. This may represent an unsubstantiated statement, but I would still have difficulty in rejecting it, both because of my own experiences and observations and as a result of decades of researching on aspects of the history of minorities.

The outstanding book under review here goes some way to proving this point. It originates in a conference held at Tel Aviv University in 2005 entitled ‘Racism in Western Civilization before 1700’. Most books which make the transition from conference to edited volume usually cannot hide this transformation because of the unevenness of the coverage and the varying quality of the different pieces, as well as the often quirky inclusion of highly idiosyncratic pieces, which bear little relevance to the central themes. The editors of *The Origins of Racism in the West* have largely avoided these traps. There are no real weak pieces, although some are better and more outstanding than others, while none of the contributions can be regarded as marginal to the central themes of the volume. While this book is ultimately not the same as a single authored study of the origins of racism (the editors point out on p. 9 that it ‘is by no means our intention or ambition to provide a systematic history of the subject’), reading it essentially gives that impression because of the tight chronological ordering of the successive pieces and the fact that virtually all of the authors tackle the key themes of the volume. It is a first rate example of how an edited book could and should work.

The editors are essentially attempting to establish whether racial ideas (and even ideology) existed before the 18th century. They see this century as a turning point, although the ideas which surfaced before 1800 and even 1850, essentially acted as a precursor to those which developed in the second half of the 19th century in Europe. Rather than focusing upon all aspects of treatment of outsiders in European societies before the 18th century, the editors and contributors focus particularly upon perceptions and, more especially ideas, as this is above all a volume which primarily concerns itself with the origins and development of racial ideas and ideology, beginning in Ancient Greece. These ideas usually manifested themselves in the written word,

although some contributors to this volume illustrate the importance of visual images.

The necessarily long introductory chapter sets the scene for what follows. The three editors cover a series of themes. They point out that ‘The aim of this collection of studies ... is to see whether we can trace a pattern ... of forms of rationalized prejudice, originating in the western world, in various periods before 1700’ (pp. 5–6), i.e. the sort of rationalized prejudice which had become normal in Europe by the beginning of the 20th century. They attempt and analyse several definitions of racism, essentially revolving around the assignation of perceived negative common characteristics towards groups which differ from the norms of those who assign them. Outsiders in the vast period covered by this book include Jews, Romanies, Muslims and Africans. As was the case with more modern forms of racism, those who marginalized black people, as several of the essays in this volume demonstrate, focused both on those in European societies and the lands from which they originated.

Following the introduction, the essays which follow do so on a chronological basis. Benjamin Isaac in ‘Racism: A Rationalization of Prejudice in Greece and Rome’ gives a clue to one of the origins of the current volume, as the piece partly consists of a response to the reviews of his book on racism in antiquity.⁽²⁾ This essay also introduces us to the central tenets of racism in the ancient world: ‘environmental determinism, the belief in the heritability of acquired characteristics and the belief in the importance of lineage’ (pp. 38–9), which also remain important in subsequent forms of racism. Isaac holds on to the assertion made in his previous book that, while full blown racial ideas may not have existed in Greece and Rome, there developed ‘a pattern of recurring efforts to ascribe to groups of human beings common characteristics on seemingly logical and presumed scientific grounds from the late 5th century to late antiquity’ (p. 56), which he illustrates through the use of a series of key texts.

One of the most marginal (in the sense of the extent to which it tackles the key themes) essays in the volume, chapter three by H. A. Shapiro on ‘The Invention of Persia in Classical Athens’, begins promisingly with a quote from Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. This piece essentially consists of an analysis of the depiction of real and mythological ‘Persians’ in 5th century BC Greek vases by an art historian. Although this is a deeply analytical piece, which tackles various themes in the depiction of Persians, it does not really tackle the key issue of racism, in the way that many of the other contributions to this volume do. The piece is lavishly illustrated using surviving vases located in repositories throughout the world.

Chapter four by David Goldenberg on ‘Racism, Symbolism and Colour Prejudice’ is an ambitious essay, which focuses upon a wide range of views of black people from the Greeks through to the Romans and Hebrews to the Early Christians. Goldenberg argues that the opposition towards them rested both upon appearance and the negative associations of the colour black (with death and evil for example) rather than fear of their actions or behaviour. However, Goldenberg questions whether the animosity which Black people faced in antiquity merits the description of racism.

Denise Kimber Buell in ‘Early Christian Universalism and Modern Forms of Racism’ tackles a complex theme. Partly based upon a reading the Acts of the Apostles, she suggests that, although Christianity displays indications of inclusiveness because it accepts anyone into the faith as long as they convert, it is equally exclusive because of the fact that it ostracizes those who reject its message. She makes comparisons with the inherently exclusive nature of modern racism, which draws clear boundaries between one group and another, but argues that fluidity of boundaries does not mean exclusiveness cannot happen. However, it seems difficult to accept the idea of a racist early Christianity, certainly as argued by Buell, because the ethnic basis is simply not strong enough. She implies that early Christians offered an alternative form of Jewishness and therefore marginalized those Jews who did not convert. Interestingly, in view of the discussion of Christian exclusiveness, Jewish attitudes towards outsiders do not have their own essay in this volume.

Robert Bartlett’s ‘Illustrating Ethnicity in the Middle Ages’ is a concise piece, which does not attempt the sort of intellectual contortions of Buell’s essay. It essentially demonstrates the role of visual images by focusing upon a series of core texts and images and pays particular attention to views of Muslims, black

people, Jews and the Irish. The essay begins by pointing to the role of hats in Hollywood westerns as identifies and then establishes common markers in the images of those minorities listed above whose meaning he deconstructs.

Peter Biller, in 'Proto-Racial Thought in Medieval Science', produces an interesting piece which attempts to demonstrate the widespread nature of proto-racism in medieval Europe. Biller both examines the ideas that were put forward and the extent to which the texts which contained such views were reproduced (by hand) by early University students before the invention of the printing press, in an attempt to ascertain how widespread they had become. While he is persuasive in his methodology about the importance of such ideas amongst students, he is less so when it comes to tackling the issues of racial beliefs amongst the population as a whole.

Joseph Ziegler's 'Physiognomy, Science, and Proto-Racism, 1200–1500' is a detailed and fascinating deconstruction of a series of texts which make a connection between physical appearance and geography. Ziegler demonstrates how many medieval writers created a link between geography, physical appearance, complexion and character. Some authors also made a connection between faces and personality. Ziegler points out that while physiognomy might be viewed as an irrational belief, in the Middle Ages it played the role of 'a rational science' (p. 182).

Charles de Miramon's 'Noble Dogs, Noble Blood: The Invention of the Concept of Race in the late Middle Ages' is one of the most important and interesting essays in the whole collection under review here. Based almost entirely upon French sources, this contribution essentially traces the origins of the concept and use of race and points to the fact that it initially categorized birds of prey and hunting dogs and then also applied to nobles. At the end of the Middle Ages race therefore distinguished people along social rather than ethnic lines.

Another outstanding essay is David Nirenberg's 'Was there Race before Modernity? The Example of "Jewish Blood" in late Medieval Spain'. This is a thoughtful and intelligent contribution written by a highly learned expert in his field writing at the height of his powers as an historian. He focuses upon the racialization of Spanish blood and demonstrates that the descendants of converts from Islam or Judaism still faced marginalization. While Nirenberg asserts that it therefore proves difficult to reject the idea of racialized blood by the 16th century in Spain, he still has problems making a direct connection with modernity.

Of the remaining contributions Valentin Groebner in 'The Carnal Knowing of a Coloured Body: Sleeping with Arabs and Blacks in the European Imagination, 1300–1500', covers a variety of questions relating to sex between Europeans and others. Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, meanwhile, in 'Religion and Race: Protestant and Catholic Discourses on Jewish Conversions in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', makes some basic points about medieval and early modern antisemitism, while also, more interestingly, discussing the challenges facing Christianity as a result of the Reformation and imperial expansion and the consequent contact, particularly in the case of Roman Catholicism, with people in the New World. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, in 'Vagrants or Vermin?' examines attitudes towards Gypsies in early modern Europe following their first arrival on the continent. Anthony Pagden's 'The Peopling of the New World: Ethnos, Race and Empire in the Early Modern World', is like the contribution by David Nirenberg in the sense of a distinguished scholar at ease with dealing with vast concepts. Pagden summarizes, in a few thousand words, whether or not race and racism existed in Spanish views of the people of the New World. One of the issues covered in this fascinating piece is the development of the idea of a second Adam, who gave birth to the peoples of the Americas. The volume concludes with another interesting essay by Jorge Cañizares on 'Demons, Stars, and the Imagination: The Early Modern Body in the Tropics'.

Collectively, the essays in this volume, written by experts in the individual areas which they tackle, illustrate the ancient and medieval origins of racism in Europe and the emerging Spanish Empire. Some of the authors do not deal directly with the issue of racism as understood during the 19th and 20th century. Nevertheless, a

reading of the book as a whole will demonstrate the concern of European writers with difference, particularly in terms of religion and appearance, since antiquity. While European society before the 18th century may not have developed the sophisticated racial concepts which peaked in the 19th and early 20th centuries, negative views of outsiders and the link with their inferiority seem ever present since antiquity. 19th-century scientific developments would allow the increasing sophistication of racial marginalization. But concepts of racial inferiority, as argued especially by Benjamin Isaac, had existed since antiquity. Whether a straight line exists from Aristotle to the Nazis seems more complicated, and the book does not have the aim of making such a link. Instead, it brings together a series of essays written by talented and learned scholars who, writing about their own individual specialism, demonstrate the centrality of concepts of racial inferiority in European history. The book is essential reading for anyone interested in the origins of racism in Europe and beyond.

Notes

1. Panikos Panayi, *Immigration, Ethnicity and Racism in Britain, 1815–1914* (Manchester, 1994).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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