

## Racism: A Short History

by George M. Fredrickson and Albert Camarillo

The other Amazon reviews are generally excellent. Two-star through five-star reviews were helpful.

The book focuses narrowly on prejudice by whites against Jews and blacks. There is some logic, in that Western societies have been dominant, and hence most subject to scrutiny over the past few centuries. Still, don't overlook Japanese prejudice against their Korean minority, Chinese when they occupied it prior to the war, or in the atrocities they committed against British and other whites they captured on their march south. Especially, do not overlook Asian prejudice against blacks. It is virulent, and they did not learn it from white colonialists.

What is racism? I consulted many dictionaries in several languages, and this is the distillate. It is some combination of beliefs, emotions and individual and group actions. We could all be racists or almost none of us.

A racist society implements discriminatory policies that result in segregation, discrimination and persecution. Those would be Fredrickson's Nazi Germany, South Africa and southern US. This is a thing of the past.

The Germans tell it like it is as far as emotion goes. They define racism as *Rassenhaß*, literally "racial hatred". Several dictionary definitions bring up the notion of racial purity, which strikes me as an emotional issue. I'd say that prejudice remains in the category of emotion until it is acted upon.

In the belief category, all the definitions agree that it is racism when one believes that there is a natural hierarchy of races, especially if you suppose your own race is better than the rest. A broader definition says you are a racist if you believe that people of different races are different in ability. What ability they don't say. The only way such a claim can have meaning is if it applies to averages, which makes it racism when I notice that great gymnasts are often Oriental, chess players Russian, basketball players black and hockey players white.

Fredrickson's failure is in taking the repudiation of the first definition, racist societies, to mean there is no substance to the third. Xenophobia is natural to the human animal, and we of course feel compelled to look for some logical justification when we practice it. Sometimes, Frederickson should admit, there is some substance.

Germans feared Jewish success in business. Were they wrong? In every society in which they are free to compete fairly, Jews are more successful financially, academically and professionally than any other groups. Amy Chu writes in "Earth on Fire" that six of the seven billionaires who emerged in post-Soviet Russia Jewish. Coincidence? She doesn't think so, and neither do I. Likewise, racists in the US claimed that blacks were not up to the same standards as others. Crime statistics, educational attainment and financial success would indicate that there was some substance to their fears.

The fact is that there is usually some substance to a stereotype. Washington D.C., the source of so much anti-segregation legislature, is one of the most segregated cities in the world. No legislator from anywhere in the country would want his kids to attend the DC schools. You

could call it racism, but it is no more than common sense. Statistics and our own eyes tell us that predominantly black school systems don't often provide a good education.

His history is good, but his thesis that racism is groundless is false. We have a more difficult problem to overcome. It has some substance, but for the health of our societies we must be tolerant and overcome it.