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Book Review: The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality

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Book Review

by
Vernon J. Williams, Jr.

The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality, by George M. Fredrickson, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT. 1988. 298 pp.

The Arrogance of Race is George M. Fredrickson's latest work, and it is a profound one. This series of articles, many of which have been published previously, was written over a span of some 20 years and represents the mature reflections of one of this country's leading intellectual historians. The work should be read by all serious students of race and racism.

Fredrickson is a humanist who locates his ideology "somewhere on the social-democratic left" and regards "racial injustice as a distinctive evil, more heinous than class inequality found in liberal capitalist societies." It is his ethical belief that "demoting other people from the ranks of humanity on grounds of race or ethnicity, and treating them accordingly, is a sin of unique and horrendous character." He views it as his task in this ambitious work to demonstrate that racism is "the product of historical circumstances involving the interaction of class, culture, and politics" (p. 7). In other words, he seeks to distinguish his own theoretical assumptions about race and class from "those of both the neo-Marxian materialists and the idealist historians who tend to treat race consciousness as a transcendent 'given' that is peculiarly resistant to contextual or situational analysis" (p. 110).

In his essays that analyze the American South during slavery and the segregation era and South Africa, Fredrickson draws on the theories of the "Minotaur," Max Weber, rather than Karl Marx. Although Weber assigned great significance to class, his emphasis on status—that is, "the life styles and the distribution of honor and prestige in a society"

—suggested that one's position in society need not "coincide with class differences or hierarchies based on relationships to the market or the means of production" (p. 158). Fredrickson, who like Weber is hostile to monocausal explanations of history, beckons scholars to "pay close attention to the *interaction* of ethnic status and class without assigning an *a priori* predominance to either" (p. 159). In so doing, Fredrickson believes one can explain why non-slaveholding whites of the Old South, who had no material stake in slavery, hated and despised blacks. Furthermore, Fredrickson thinks the "ethnic status" of most whites in the post-bellum South, which was derived from the fact that blacks occupied the lowest stratum in the southern class system, was an important causal factor in the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups. Proponents of the view that the folk, in their resistance to modernity, are somehow inherently good will find scant comfort in Fredrickson's remark that "injustice and cruelty come from the bottom up as well as from the top down, and from precapitalist as well as capitalist sources" (p. 170).

Fredrickson's essays in comparative history are insightful and ambitious. It is his contention that one of the significant features that distinguishes the history of race relations in the United States from those in South Africa is the presence of "an American conscience on issues involving equal access to citizenship." This "color-blind republicanism," which flowed through the abolitionists, the Radical Republicans, and the NAACP, Fredrickson argues, was "empowered" when "powerful material interests ceased actively supporting the cause of white supremacy" (p. 229). Fredrickson has indeed raised an important issue here, and this reviewer questions whether "color blind" egalitarianism will be sufficient to weather the problems of the twenty-first century. Fredrickson has performed a significant service in addressing major issues of race and racism in this wide-ranging and refreshingly rigorous work.

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