

Topic Page: [Racism](#)

Definition: **racism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Doctrine advocating the superiority of one human race. Racism has been the policy of certain regimes that, as a result, sanctioned slavery and discriminatory practices, such as anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany and apartheid in South Africa. In 1967, UNESCO defined racism as 'anti-social beliefs and acts which are based on a fallacy that discriminatory inter-group relations are justifiable on biological grounds'.



Image from: [Slavery in the ancient world was generally a... in Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World](#)

Summary Article: **RACISM**

From *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*

Racism generally means believing that a person's behavior is determined by stable inherited characteristics deriving from separate racial stocks; each of these distinctive attributes is then evaluated in relation to ideas of superiority and inferiority. This implies that there is a social construction in which certain groups of people are superior to others. This social construction is the result of social, economic, and political factors that have ascribed power to some groups, while leaving others powerless.

In a world of increased global migration, racism is at the core of contemporary debates in countries with multicultural societies. Most people in the United States agree that racism is bad, and many acknowledge that economic, political, and cultural institutions help to maintain the system of racial and ethnic oppression. Similarly in Europe, racism is a driving factor in the electoral process and has drawn considerable public attention. This entry looks at the role of racism in Western society, historical perspectives, the current situation, and the future.

Role of Racism

Racism both in the United States and Europe deals with the dimension of power, especially when it is related to dominant and minority social groups. This dimension of power leads to a variety of attitudes and behaviors toward certain groups, which often take the form of racism in a multicultural society. Many scholars argue that power is established and exercised only by being vested with the force of discrimination, exclusion, and enforcement; it contributes to the development of a system in which the majority group dominates the minority group.

Giving a broader perspective to this definition, other scholars note that power is a crucial factor but also argue that power is not the sole factor underlying racism. According to these scholars, power is sought because there is an economic gain in it. Scholars further add that because of inadequate socialization and cultural factors, racism becomes an early tool of exploitation and oppression where both economics and social factors play a major part.

Racism in Sociohistorical Discourse

In their studies of racism, some scholars argue that racism had its origins in Europe during the 16th century with the rise of nationalism and that it was applied first to class conflicts and then to national conflicts. Other researchers have dated racism's appearance to the age of colonialism and expansionism, when White Europeans confronted non-Whites in situations of conquest and exploitation. In the United States, without this history of far-flung colonies, White supremacy attained

its fullest ideological and institutional development in the southern United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The past few decades saw a new dimension in the history of racism. Contemporary European and U.S. societies have become increasingly multiethnic and multicultural and have undergone a massive transformation at an unprecedented speed during the last 2 decades. This transformation, which greatly widened the range of cultural diversity within these societies, was accompanied by a marked increase in racial tensions in cities and other social infrastructures. Although public officials emphasize the great strides that have been made, many scholars assert what most minorities seem to believe: that racism is on the rise in both the United States and Europe.

Increasing Racism

Until recently, incidents of racial hatred appear to have been rare in Scandinavian countries. However, a rather different picture has developed in recent years as racism has emerged in these societies as well. A report from the Norwegian national newspaper *Aftenposten* Web site reveals that the Swedish police arrested several hundred youths when violence broke out after a neo-Nazi rock concert in the suburb of Stockholm in December 1997. Those arrested included Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Germans, and U.S. citizens. The concert was organized by White supremacist groups, bearing swastikas and compact discs of rock music “boasting the supremacy of the White race.” According to this report, the U.S.-based nationalist band Max Resist was the main attraction of the concert.

Another instance of the increasing salience of racism can be found in the wave of political mobilization against immigration during the triumph of democracy in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, which continues into the 21st century. The consequences of this democratization over totalitarianism and the population movements that followed threaten further to escalate racism in these societies. The enlargement of the European Union has also left open to public view concerns about greater migration of a variety of ethnic and religious groups across borders that had been closed for generations.

Added to this concern is also the resurgence of anti-immigrant prejudice after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the 2005 London transport bombings. Based on both incidents, immigration and the possibility of homegrown terrorists are often viewed as threats to national security. In the United States and the United Kingdom, public opinion was openly expressed against persons of Arab and Muslim descent, whom many people in the United States believed have a connection with the terrorists. Many Arabs and Muslims in both Great Britain and the United States denounced terrorism, but this did little to reduce public anxiety.

Racism today has its roots in the form associated with modern European imperialism, and although slavery and colonialism are products of history, anti-Semitism and ethnic nationalism have from time to time flourished in Europe and elsewhere. Since the events of September 11th, there has been an increase in the number of Islamophobic incidents, both in Europe and the United States, such as difficulties faced by Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, and more general difficulty in finding employment, harassment in public places, and telephone threats to mosques and public figures. In the United States, there have been incidents where “suspicious-looking” foreigners came under the scrutiny of government agencies.

Finally, the social and economic factors, along with power dimension are important for understanding the aspects of racism. If racism is related to these concepts and to the existence of ethnic groups and

minorities, and if this perception of racism is widely accepted, then the struggle against racism has to be continued in the political, cultural, and socioeconomic fields for years to come.

Outlook

Racism and its related issues are likely to be a growing challenge for Western democracies. Racism creates elements of prejudice and discrimination and if not controlled it can undermine human relationships. Most Europeans and U.S. residents do not think of themselves as racist. However, because of socioeconomic concerns, these same people might opt for harsher and stricter immigrant policies and will often not support full integration and social cohesion of minority groups in the society. This attitude is exemplified by strict immigration control and policies. Although not racially explicit, the strict immigration policies of the Western industrialized countries will prohibit the entry of anyone deemed to be “unsuitable,” or not fulfilling certain entry requirements, thus, effectively limiting the entry of “undesirable” ethnic groups.

It would be neither accurate nor constructive to portray European and North American societies as purely negative in combating racism. Europeans’ consciousness has also developed a deep antiracist impulse, because of political doctrines such as liberalism and socialism. To dampen anxieties and to show solidarity toward Muslims in the United States, federal, state, and local elected leaders have declared that the acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith.

In the 21st century, globalization and information technology have brought the nations of the world closer. In this world of interdependence, it is important that people of different races acknowledge their common characteristics, even while embracing their different ways of life.

See also

Anti-Semitism; Civil Rights Movement; Discrimination; Europe; Globalization; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; Islamophobia; London Bombings; Minority/Majority; Racial Profiling; Racism; Refugees; Swedish Americans; United Kingdom

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