

Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler, eds. *The Origins of Racism in the West*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xiv + 333 pp. index. illus. \$99. ISBN: 978-0-521-88855-4.

These essays, not responding much to one another, react in some way to Isaac's fundamental *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (2004). This book is a triptych in which classical, medieval, and early modern historians reject, to varying degrees, the modernist stance on the recent origins of scientific racism. Why should anyone concerned with modern racism bother about anything written or done before 1600? These scholars have good answers, without falling into simplistic jingles of the originist project. They want to advance and enrich current debates by giving racism a longer and more complex pedigree. Hence there is also much in this book on the equally important consequences of racism.

The fifteen authors mostly agree on a modern definition of racism that accepts George Fredrickson's idea that the problem of racism concerns that part of human difference which people believe is innate, and Colin Kidd's point that these differences are in the observers' minds, not the subjects' bodies. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra rightly observes about tropical early modern bodies that contemporaries viewed some aspects of the human body as unstable or permeable, but the racist project has always emphasized those human features which appear to breed true. Inherited traits, linked to the words *race* and *raza* as they first appear in fifteenth-century French and Iberian dialects, have led Charles de Miramon and David Nirenberg to some philological points about the origins of racism.

One important way to deepen understanding of racism's past requires a closer look at exactly what people can change about themselves, and what they cannot. Yet even this perspective on innateness is a problem, especially concerning religion. Western monotheisms have over time given different messages to potential converts: you cannot join, you should join, you must join but will never be equal. These unstable stances cast some doubt on whether fixity is necessary for racism, as Denise Kimber Buell has observed about early Christian universalism and as Ronnie Hsia continues to explore in an astute look at Catholic and Protestant discourses on Jewish conversions. Religion seems to raise issues concerning the potential for faith to abolish or to sharpen ideas about human differences. In a similar vein Valentin Groebner has asked good questions about sexual relations between Europeans and Arabs and blacks and concluded that sex is as revealing and as deceitful as any other alleged marker of difference. An essay on Islam in any era would have enriched the collective analysis of Jewish, Christian, and polytheistic traditions, which in turn may very well have shaped common attitudes about ethnicity and human differences. Gender too would have benefited from a systematic investigation.

Since so much of the controversy about racism concerns the misuses of modern science to justify bogus claims about innate human traits, it is certainly time to take a closer look at the rich sources on premodern science to see how learned contemporaries made claims about the inheritability and meanings of human

qualities. Peter Biller, in an elegant essay on what he terms “proto-racial” thought in medieval sciences, investigates books that became a standard part of an advanced education in the arts or medicine. Knowledge from Hippocrates or the part of Aristotle’s work on animals brought forward old opinions about how soils, other environmental factors, and bodily humors shaped human differences. Biller pays attention to an increasing premodern debate about the meanings and consequences of skin color, and the Jewish body that cannot be changed by spiritual conversion. He has uncovered fresh evidence for a deepening interest in the causes of skin color differences. Evidence on the opinions of ordinary people not directly affected by learned discourses is very hard to find. Nevertheless, Biller has made an important start in proving that racist thought permeated the required reading assigned to generations of university-trained professionals in the clergy, medicine, and the law.

Joseph Ziegler has read widely in one medieval and early modern science, physiognomy, and concluded that its texts from 1200 to 1500 had little to say about race. In the Christian West these physiognomers neglected the Mongols and Saracens, though there are signs that the new peoples of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would give physiognomy yet another lease on intellectual life. Ziegler’s essay is typical of the interdisciplinary, boundary-crossing features of this collection, which is essential reading for anyone working on racism, anywhere and in any period.

STEVEN A. EPSTEIN  
University of Kansas