

EPILOGUE

Racism at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century

It is widely believed that racism remains a major international problem at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The term is used in some countries and in some circles to describe hostility and discrimination directed against a group for virtually any reason. The French, for example, sometimes use the term to describe biases founded on age, gender, or sexual orientation. Usually, however, the act of racializing the Other seizes upon differences that are “ethnic” in some sense. According to political scientist Donald L. Horowitz, ethnicity “is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate. Some notion of ascription, however diluted, and affinity deriving from it are inseparable from the concept of ethnicity.”¹ The marks or identifiers usually associated with ethnicity are language, religion, customs, and physical characteristics (inborn or acquired). One or more (sometimes all) may serve as sources of ethnic divi-

siveness; any one of them can provoke disdain, discrimination, or violence on the part of another group that does not share the trait or traits that have come to define ethnic Otherness. It is justifiable, as I once did in an essay, to describe the essence of racism as ethnicity made hierarchical, or, in other words, making difference invidious and disadvantageous through the application of power.² But, as the preceding chapters of this book suggest, I would now put more stress than I did then on the presence and articulation of a belief that the defining traits are innate or unchangeable. Pigmentation, however, is not the only supposedly indelible mark of difference upon which racism can be based, as the history of antisemitism clearly demonstrates.

In September 2001 the United Nations sponsored a World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. This multiple terminology suggests that doubt may have existed as to whether the use of the term “racism” by itself was sufficient to denote all the hostilities and oppressions that concerned the conferees. In the introduction to this book I made distinctions between racism and xenophobia and between racial and religious intolerance. Xenophobia (literally the fear of strangers) is an ancient and virtually universal phenomenon, while racism, I have argued, is a historical construction with a traceable career covering the period between the fourteenth century and the twenty-first. Religious bigotry is directed at what people believe and not at what they are. Unlike “racial” characteristics, religious convictions are usually considered changeable by an act of will. (It is, however, useful to be reminded by Horowitz that for many groups outside the West, “religion

is not a matter of faith but a given, an integral part of their identity, and for some an inextricable component of their sense of peoplehood.”)³ In the third chapter, I argued that racism has declined in the past half-century as a result of the Holocaust and the subsequent overthrow of Jim Crow in the United States and apartheid in South Africa. Does this mean that the UN conference can be viewed as a kind of valedictory to an “age of racism,” and that we can anticipate a new century without the kind of hatreds and injustices that have characterize the old one? Is racism only, or soon to be only, history?

Unfortunately racism survives even in the carefully delineated sense that has governed this study of its history. The Holocaust and decolonization may have permanently discredited what I have called “overtly racist regimes,” but this good news should not be inflated into a belief that racism itself is dead or even dying. As we saw in earlier chapters, group inequalities associated with what are taken to be indelible marks of inferior or unworthy ancestry can exist without having the full apparatus of the modern state to sustain them. We have also had the opportunity to observe situations in which ideologies that do not invoke race in the modern biological sense serve to rationalize caste systems or forms of exploitation that reflect the essentially racist vision of indelible, unbridgeable, and invidious differences between human groups. What has been called “the new racism” in the United States, Great Britain, and France is a way of thinking about difference that reifies and essentializes culture rather than genetic endowment, or in other words makes culture do the work of race.⁴ The arrival of large numbers of immigrants from former colonies in En-

gland and France has encouraged the use of “culture” as a way of distinguishing unwelcome newcomers for those who are genuinely “British” or “French.” In Britain skin color and culture remain closely associated, and it is often assumed that ways of life are as unchangeable as pigmentation. In France color per se is less important; in theory dark-skinned or swarthy newcomers may be deemed acceptable if they show the desire and capacity to assimilate. But it is generally assumed that most of them cannot or will not assimilate to *la culture française* by sacrificing their preexisting ethnic and religious identities. The United States, traditionally a land of immigrants, may be better able than most European nations to deal with the cultural diversity created by immigration. But discrimination against African Americans is now being justified as “rational” because it may be an appropriate response to the “dysfunctional” subculture that has allegedly taken possession of the souls of many black folk. The adverse effect of negative stereotypes on African Americans is intensified by the fact that their pigmentation makes them so easily identifiable.⁵

There is another sense in which the discrediting of scientific racism and the revulsion against official or legalized discrimination have fallen short of achieving racial justice and equality. Histories of slavery, Jim Crow, apartheid, or colonization have left many members of previously stigmatized and legally disadvantaged groups in an economically and psychologically vulnerable situation, which may make it difficult for them to compete with those whose families and forebears have not had to undergo such shattering experiences. The blacks now in power in South Africa cannot, given the resources at their command, adequately compen-

sate blacks for three and a half centuries of expropriation, exploitation, and deprivation to the extent that would be required to make them truly equal to the whites. The damage left behind by “overtly racist regimes” may also encourage antisocial or self-destructive behavior. The failures and “pathologies” that can result seem to confirm negative stereotypes about the group that persist despite the removal of the full ideological scaffolding that once sustained them. Justice Harry Blackmun put it succinctly in a United States Supreme Court decision of 1978 that upheld the principle of affirmative action: “[I]n order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently. We cannot—we dare not—let the Equal Protection clause perpetuate racial supremacy.”⁶ It is not merely a matter of failing to eliminate the last remnants of an outworn and discredited set of ideas and practices. The legacy of the past racism directed at blacks in the United States is more like a bacillus that we have failed to destroy, a live germ that not only continues to make some of us ill but retains the capacity to generate new strains of a disease for which we have no certain cure.

Antisemitic racism also persists and, despite the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, retains the capacity to do harm. Hate groups in many countries continue to believe in the Hitlerian myth that the world is threatened by a Jewish conspiracy. The World Wide Web is filled with their ranting. (In the United States, where hatred of blacks and hatred of Jews tend to go together in the psyches of ultraracists, African Americans are often portrayed on the Websites as the mindless tools of diabolically clever Jews

plotting to destroy white Christian America.) In Germany, France, the United States, and several eastern European countries, Jews have been attacked, swastikas painted on synagogues, and Jewish cemeteries desecrated. For many years, the Arab governments that object vehemently to the State of Israel and its policies have sponsored the dissemination of classic antisemitic propaganda, including that notorious forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁷

In the Western democracies antisemitism is officially deplored, and words or actions based on it are confined to fringe groups that operate outside the law or (except in Austria) to parties that are too small to have much chance of sharing power in the foreseeable future. But Jewish leaders in several countries fear that passive antisemitism remains widespread, and that circumstances can be imagined that would cause a resurgence of its more virulent manifestations. The actions of the State of Israel against the Palestinians have led to charges by the General Assembly of the United Nations that Zionism constitutes a form of racism. It is difficult to deny that Israel has at times been unjust and even brutal to the Palestinians in the occupied territories or even within Israel itself. But is this racism, or the product of a conflict that is truly based on culture and religion rather than on differing “bloodlines” or genetic constitutions?

As the capacious title of the UN conference suggests, the main problem of human relations in the world today may not be solely, or perhaps even principally, one of racism in the sense of the term used in this book. If racism is not dead, it is less intense and intellectually respectable than it was a century or even a half-century ago. But human beings continue to mistreat other human beings on the basis of

their ethnic identities. In a sense we may have returned to the chronological starting point of this inquiry. Before “the invention of racism” Christians persecuted Jews and Muslims because of their beliefs and the behavior that was associated with them. The Crusades were not fought under the banner of white, Aryan, or Indo-European superiority or the divine right of the *Herrenvolk* to rule over lesser breeds. The conflicts were defined in what we would today call cultural rather than racial terms. Of course, as has been often shown in this study, the line between “culturalism” and racism is not difficult to cross. Culture and even religion can become essentialized to the point that they can serve as a functional equivalent of biological racism, as has to some extent occurred recently in the perception of blacks in the United States and Britain, and of Muslims in several predominantly Christian nations.⁸

But many of the most bitter and bloody ethnic conflicts of our time have not required the full racialization of the Other to become devastating. Most of the minorities throughout the world that are victimized by discrimination or violence appear to be differentiated from their oppressors more by authentic cultural or religious differences than by race in the genetic sense. Irish Catholics in Ulster, North African Muslims in France, Turks in Germany, Albanian Muslims in what remains of Yugoslavia, Bosnians under Serbian or Croatian rule, Chechens in Russia, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Buddhists in Chinese-ruled Tibet, and Palestinians in Israel (one could go on and on) are not generally conceived of by the relevant majorities in terms that are racial in the sense used in this study. They are identified by their beliefs and behav-

ior—not, or at least not principally, by their physical appearance or ancestry. In all or most of these cases, religion is the most salient difference between persecutors and persecuted. In social scientific terminology, the differences are thus ethnic, yes, but primarily ethnoreligious rather than ethnoracial. At this point, however, a reader might well feel that it makes little or no practical difference whether the inhumanity of one *ethnos* against another is based on religious fanaticism or on alleged differences in genetic endowment. Stress on religion and absence of the ideological component of biological determinism do not prevent massacres, ethnic cleansing, denial of equal citizenship, and economic discrimination.⁹ The temptation to follow the current tendency to expand the term “racism” to include xenophobia and persecution based on religious and cultural differences is indeed difficult to resist.

Were we to succumb to this catchall usage, however, we would be unable to appreciate the special features of the Western ideological racism described in this study, such as its close relationship to the enslavement and colonial domination of people of color and the way that its antisemitic embodiment reflected the trauma of capitalist modernization. As we look to the future, we might also fail to recognize that making religion the principal marker of difference has implications somewhat different from those generated by locating it in the blood or the genes. As was the case with early medieval Christianity’s abuse of Jews and Muslims, religious intolerance normally has an escape hatch. Conversion is always a theoretical possibility and may actually occur in some cases, especially when there is intermarriage between members of different ethnoreli-

gious groups. (To my knowledge, none of the contemporary loci of ethnic conflict or domination have generated the formal prohibitions on intermarriage that characterized the overtly racist regimes, but ordinarily one spouse or the other must convert.) If ethnoreligious differences are less rigid than ethnoracial ones, however, they may be more durable. In an incisive comparison of conflict in South Africa and Northern Ireland, the sociologist Hamish Dickie-Clark predicted accurately in 1976 that the formal racial divide in South Africa would be easier to overcome than the sectarian split in Ulster. He based his prognostication on the belief that “racist claims are open to rational and empirical refutation, whereas the claims made by sectarian religion are so deeply imbedded in the matrix of faith and other-worldly authority that they are not similarly open to logic and observation.”¹⁰ Although it takes much more than rational persuasion to overcome racism, the fact that its foundations are subject to empirical falsification does make it more fragile than the incontrovertible and unquestioning faith demanded by sectarian or fundamentalist religion. Along with the dissemination of the truth about human physical differences, the struggle against racism also requires that stigmatized groups have enforceable civil rights, political empowerment in proportion to their numbers, and equal opportunity in education and employment (which may require special efforts to compensate for disadvantages inherited from the past). If persisting racial prejudices and inequalities make the complete separation of race and state counterproductive, the first line of defense against militant sectarianism would seem to be a total separation of church and state. The high wall that the United States

Supreme Court has at times affirmed, despite constant threats from zealous members of the Protestant majority, might serve as a model for other religiously diverse nations. If the United States has for most of its history set a bad example in the area of race relations, it has established a relatively good record in its handling of the religious diversity resulting from immigration.¹¹

Will the color line of the twentieth century therefore be replaced or overshadowed by the faith or creed lines of the twenty-first? Will conflicts more often take the form of jihads or crusades than movements for human rights or social justice? Many signs point in that direction. Racism, as we have seen, offers material and psychological rewards to an ethnic group that has the power and the will to dominate or eliminate another ethnic group that it defines as inherently different from itself in ways justifying the treatment it receives. The emotion to which it appeals is either contempt or fear, depending on whether the dominant group views the Other as under control and securely “in its place” or conceivably capable of competition or reprisal. Its essential context has been the rise of commercial and industrial capitalism, and its trigger has been the interests and anxieties aroused by that great historical transformation.

But in the twenty-first century, we confront a global capitalism that draws no color line, because it seeks customers and collaborators from every race. A de facto color line remains because the non-Europeans of the world are, as a result of slavery, colonialism, or a late start on the path of modernization, on the average poorer and more disadvantaged than people of white or European ancestry. But active racism is not necessary to maintain this “new world

order,” nor is it clear that conventional antiracism can do very much to change it. In this context militant sectarianism or religious tribalism can easily become the refuge of people whose sense of community and traditional ethical values are threatened.¹² There is no arguing with someone who believes that abortion is murder or that eating pork or slaughtering cattle is an offense in the eyes of God. But it is not dogmatic religion itself that creates ethnoreligious conflict or theocratic regimes. It is the politicization of faith and the effort to make others conform to beliefs they do not share that threaten the peace of the world and of many countries within it. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan in ways that much of the rest of the world found unacceptable. But there are many milder manifestations of combative and coercive religious zealotry. Israelis and Palestinians are willing to fight to the death over control of sacred sites. Although most Muslim immigrants to Europe are not potential terrorists and do not seek to impose their beliefs on others, Christians and secularists alike make them targets of suspicion and discrimination. In the United States, the religious right seeks to control the behavior of those who do not share its views of abortion, sexual orientation, sexual morality, or euthanasia. In some countries, such as India, conflict and discrimination arise from the direct confrontation of dogmatic religious faiths. In others—the United States being a conspicuous example—the fault lines may be between the combined forces of more than one variety of dogmatic religiosity and a coalition of tolerant ecumenists and nonreligious humanists.

It would be premature to contend that trying to contain culture wars over spiritual or moral values should replace

struggles against racial hatred and domination at the center of concern for those who seek a just and peaceful world. As has been suggested, religion easily becomes race in the twisted minds of racist skinheads in eastern Germany or the United States. What characterizes many of the perpetrators of violence against the Other (whether identified racially or religiously) is social marginality. The greatest danger of direct violence comes from those descended from privileged or at least securely settled groups who find themselves on the outside of the modern (or postmodern) world of communications technology, global financial markets, and bureaucratized nation-states. Alienation from the course of local or world development can provoke either racism or religious fanaticism, depending on the cultural and social situation. Grasping for one's identity in a world that threatens to reduce everyone who is not part of the elite to a low-paid worker or a consumer of cheap, mass-produced commodities creates a hunger for meaning and a sense of self-worth that can most easily be satisfied by consciousness of race or religion. Race offers less of a haven to the alienated and disenchanting than it once did, because of the worldwide campaign against it that was one of the great achievements of the twentieth century. But absolutist religion retains its appeal, and to the extent that it becomes militant and politicized, it has the potential to become the twenty-first century's principal source of intergroup conflict and aggression.