

Proto-racism in Graeco-Roman antiquity

Benjamin Isaac

Abstract

In spite of the usual assumption that racism is a form of prejudice which developed in recent history, it is argued here that prototypes of racism were prevalent in Greek and Roman thinking. Racism here is taken as representing a form of rationalizing and systematically justifying various forms of prejudice, a conceptual process which was part of the Greek intellectual development in general. The forms which this proto-racism took were different from those encountered in the twentieth century and they did not lead to systematic persecution, but they were influential at the time and deeply influenced later authors in the age of the Enlightenment and afterwards, who accepted these ideas together with others which they found in the Greek and Latin literature. The concepts discussed are: environmental determinism, the inheritance of acquired characteristics, a combination of these, and pure lineage. A related issue is the ancient view of slavery and the connection with concepts of empire in classical antiquity. Influential then, as in later times, was the sense that imperial expansion and migration inevitably lead to degeneration and collective deterioration both through the influence of debilitating climate and by contamination with the flaws of inferior peoples. Furthermore it is argued that the stereotypical views of foreign peoples may not have determined imperial policy, but nevertheless had their impact on the political and military decisions that were made.

Keywords

Racism; proto-racism; Greece; Rome; slavery; imperialism.

Preliminary remarks

There appears to be a consensus that racism as such originates in modern times. Since it is thought not to be attested earlier, conventional wisdom usually denies that there was any race hatred in the ancient world (Fredrickson 2002: 17; unsatisfactory: Hannaford 1996: chs 2, 3; a different view: Delacampagne 1983). The prejudices that existed, so it is believed, were ethnic or cultural, not racial. In this paper I shall discuss three topics. First, I shall argue that prototypes of racism were common in the Graeco-Roman world. My second point will be to describe the close links between those forms of prejudice and ancient ideas about slavery. Finally, I shall have something to say about the connection

between these concepts and ancient imperialism. The ideas proposed in this paper are fully discussed in a recent book (Isaac 2004).

Obviously, in classical antiquity racism did not exist in the modern form of a biological determinism. Clearly too there was no systematic persecution of any ethnic or presumed racial group by another, let alone the massive excesses to which state-imposed racist doctrine led in the twentieth century. However, I shall argue that it is justified to speak of early forms of racism, or 'proto-racism', as a widespread phenomenon in antiquity. I do not claim that prejudice and bigotry are invented in the West; I claim that the specific forms of rationalizing these prejudices and attempting to base them in systematic, abstract thought were developed in antiquity and taken over in early modern Europe. Nobody will deny that racism as an ideology developed in Europe, not in China, Japan or India. It is generally accepted that Greek civilization was the first to raise the level of abstract, systematic abstract thought to a level that we now recognize as approaching our own. I assert that the Greeks not only contributed the first attempt to think systematically about, e.g., political systems, but also the first effort to find a rational and systematic basis for their own sense of superiority and their claim that others were inferior. The subjects of my study are precisely the conceptual mechanisms which they developed towards this purpose and which were taken over with alacrity by later thinkers.

Hostility towards foreigners occurs in every society, but in widely differing degrees, social settings and moral environments. An essential component of such hostility is always the tendency to generalize and simplify, so that whole nations are viewed as if they were a single individual with a single personality. I should emphasize at the outset that one of the difficulties in studying group prejudices in antiquity is the lack of any term in Greek and Latin for 'racism', for 'prejudice' or 'discrimination'. Anticipating the conclusions of this paper I would like to suggest that the lack of such terminology stems from the fact that there existed no intellectual, moral or emotional objections against such generalizations. We must therefore trace the development of ideas and attitudes for which there existed no terminology in the culture under consideration. It will be clear from this description that this paper is concerned exclusively with the history of specific ideas, not with the social history of antiquity or with the practice of discrimination and persecution in Greece and Rome. While I do not underestimate the importance of these topics as such the justification for this approach is that the ancient ideas are found in Greek and Latin literature. This literature was widely read for centuries in the West and the ideas found there had a profound influence on later generations. This leads me to a second point that requires explanation. This paper focuses on literary sources, that is, on the writings of the male elites in Greece and Rome. Quite clearly we cannot assume that the ideas expressed by members of those circles are identical with those of the representatives of other classes in Greece and Rome. Simple traders, farmers and professional soldiers did not leave us their ideas, so we cannot study them, nor can we interview common people on the streets of ancient cities. Since there is, however, a substantial body of ancient literature there is work to do and it is worth doing it, particularly because, as already noted, these authors continued to be read till the present time.

Modern definitions of race are numerous, definitions of racism a little less so and it is the latter that is needed here, for I am studying attitudes of mind and their development. It will be clear that the nature of the definition always reflects the focus and outlook of the

definer. My definition of racism is as follows: 'an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography.' This is long, but it covers the subject. The essence of racism is then that it regards individuals as superior or inferior because they are believed to share imagined physical, mental and moral attributes with the group to which they are deemed to belong, and it is assumed that they cannot change these traits individually. This is held to be impossible, because these traits are determined by their physical make-up. This is a relatively broad, yet precise definition, broader than the ones usually employed. I am not the first to search for a flexible yet precise definition. Another author who did so was Albert Memmi in his lucid and influential book on the subject (Memmi 2000). He rightly observes that too narrow a definition will not allow us forms of racism that fail to correspond with the forms of it which dominated in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Miles and Brown also emphasize the fluidity of racism as an ideology which is applied in different periods and different societies to various groups while still maintaining definable characteristics (Miles and Brown 2003: 103–13).

A somewhat wider definition makes it possible recognize forms of racism that are not steered exclusively by biological determinism. Indeed, few historians now would deny that many authors of the Enlightenment, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, adhered to a form of racism that was common before Darwin's revolution. It was his scientific breakthrough which made it possible to develop a pseudo-scientific form of racism, based on current biological theory. The advantage for the racist of the latter concept was that it seemed to give a justification for prejudice, based on influences entirely from within. Genetics were used to build a theory of constant and unchangeable characteristics for entire groups of people. These characteristics, it was then claimed, were passed on from one generation to the next. The essence can best be illustrated with an example: in nineteenth-century Germany and Austria Jews who converted to Christianity became thereby in principle eligible for certain official positions. This represents an attitude of religious and social intolerance. Under the Nazi regime it made no difference whether a Jew was converted or not: his descent was all that mattered.

However, before Darwin there existed other forms of racism, based on the idea that external influences, such as climate and geography determined the basic characteristics of entire peoples. These may be found in the works of French authors such as Jean Bodin (1530–96), John Arbuthnot (1667–1735) and, most influential, Montesquieu (1689–1755). In Germany, Herder and Christoph Meiners represent this school of thought (Isaac 2004: 56–7, 102–8). It is well known that these authors read their classical literature thoroughly and it is therefore only natural to look for precursors of these particular ideas in the ancient authors which they read. 'The authority of Greek and Roman texts should not be underestimated in providing ruling-class men (of the eighteenth century), in particular, with the distinction between themselves and barbarians' (Wheeler 2000: 15).

I will now briefly consider five concepts which, together, were in antiquity commonly held to determine the collective nature of groups, or the character of peoples. These are: environmental determinism, the inheritance of acquired characteristics, a combination of

these two ideas, the constitution and form of government, autochthony and pure lineage. This will be followed by some thoughts about the connection between those ideas and the ideology of ancient imperialism.