

Introduction

This collection brings together eleven essays written over the past fifteen years or so that either reflect on the current practice of comparative history or represent my own efforts to do this kind of work. The latter essays emerged from a topical interest in racism and antiracism that antedates my explicitly comparative scholarship. Most concern black-white relations in the United States and South Africa; but one, published here for the first time as chapter 6, deals with mid-nineteenth-century ideas about race and empire in Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on American democracy and the French colonization of Algeria. Earlier versions of the piece, called "Understanding Racism" (chapter 5), which attempted to define and historicize racism in a general way, appeared in places where few readers are likely to have seen them; this essay has been substantially expanded and reformulated.¹

The other essays either were published before 1997 or were originally prepared for symposia or edited books of essays and may appear in slightly different form in the resulting volumes. Except in the case of "From Black Power to Black Consciousness" (chapter 11), which has been condensed from a longer piece, these essays have not been significantly revised. Either they are recent enough to reflect my current thinking, or, as in the case of the survey of comparative historiography from 1980 (chapter 1), an essay is juxtaposed with a later essay of similar scope (chapter 3) to show how my assessment

of the field has evolved in light of subsequent scholarship, including my own.

Introducing this volume prompts some autobiographical reflections. Comparative historians are still rare enough to evoke curiosity about how they came to embrace that role. When I am asked, as I often am, how I first got interested in comparative history, I am never able to provide a very good answer because I cannot remember a time when I did not take a comparative approach to almost everything I was thinking seriously about. I instinctively assimilate new experience by first asking what familiar thing it resembles and then how it differs. Everyone does this to some extent, but in my case the urge to compare things may be especially intense and possibly a bit obsessive. Perhaps my comparative bent stems ultimately from the fact that my family made several major moves when I was child, and I was always contrasting where I was with where I had previously been.

As an undergraduate majoring in History and Literature at Harvard, I concentrated on what amounted to American studies, partly because at that time I did not have enough French to pursue my original plan to study the United States, England, and France since 1800. (I had the misfortune to attend a public high school that offered neither French nor German.) When I came to write a senior honors thesis, I chose a topic with a comparative dimension—an investigation of Norwegian-American writing that compelled me to assess the Old World background as well as the New World experiences of an articulate group of first- and second-generation immigrants. A chapter on the ethnic dimension of Thorstein Veblen's thought was later published in *The American Quarterly*.²

At this point I was uncertain whether to pursue historical or literary studies in graduate school. A Fulbright to Norway that was supposed to involve a further study of immigration history actually became an excursion into comparative literature. The fruit of this year was a published article on Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* that compared the ideas at work in the play with Nietzsche's "neopagan" ethics. I also attempted a comparative study of Ibsen and Melville based on their shared experience when, as children, both writers suffered a loss of status and security when their fathers went bankrupt. My enterprise also failed, but its insolvency taught me the valuable lesson that comparison must be based on substantive rather than incidental or superficial similarities.³

Although it is clear to me now that my interest in literature was historical rather than aesthetic, I seriously considered doing graduate

work in comparative literature. But I was again foiled by language requirements. Although I now had some French and Norwegian, the latter was not in demand, and I therefore lacked the second “major” European language and the Greek or Latin that was then also required. I decided eventually on the American Civilization program at Harvard because it allowed me to defer the choice between literary and historical studies and also seemed to have a comparative aspect in that secondary fields were required in the history or literature of two other societies. It soon became apparent, however, that this requirement was pro forma and not meant as an invitation to sustained comparative work. I therefore became a thoroughgoing Americanist and put my cross-national interests on the back burner: my dissertation was on that seemingly most American of subjects—the Civil War.⁴

My one significant foray into comparative history as a graduate student occurred when I took Louis Hartz’s seminar on comparative political thought. In it Hartz expounded at length the ideas that would inform his *Founding of New Societies*. It was my first exposure to a frame of reference that would include both South Africa and the United States. My seminar paper, however, compared the Utopian socialism of Edward Bellamy and William Morris on the very Hartzian basis that the lack of a tradition of communalism handed down from the Middle Ages made American radical thought more individualistic than the English equivalent. There may have been some validity to the argument, but I am glad that I did not attempt to publish this first attempt at comparative history. I had made the mistake of taking Hartz’s concept of American exceptionalism as an established truth to be applied and exemplified rather than as a debatable hypothesis to be tested.⁵

When I left graduate school, I had seemingly found a professional identity as an intellectual historian of nineteenth-century America with a special interest in the issues raised by the North–South conflict and the Civil War. My second book concentrated on the great unresolved issue arising from the war—the place of emancipated blacks in the American republic. What turned out to be a lifelong commitment to the study of race and racism was driven by the strong emotions aroused in me by the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and its disappointing aftermath. White supremacy struck me then—and still strikes me today—as America’s most persistent problem and its greatest shame, the most glaring and lamentable contradiction of what were supposed to be its fundamental values. I resolved to probe the intellectual and ideological foundations of what Gunnar Myrdal called “the American dilemma.”

This field of study also invited comparison with slavery and race relations in other societies.

The Black Image in the White Mind, published in 1971, was not comparative in any sustained way. But a reading of sociologist Pierre van den Berghe's incisive cross-cultural study *Race and Racism* provided me with the concept of "Herrenvolk democracy," an illuminating and provocative key to the question of how white Americans, particularly defenders of slavery and segregation, had managed to resolve in their own minds the conflict between the egalitarian values of the Declaration of Independence and the practice of racial domination. I was struck by the fact that van den Berghe had found a similar pattern in South Africa, and at some point the thought occurred to me that a full historical comparison of the development of white supremacist attitudes, ideologies, and policies in the two countries might prove valuable.⁶

The decision to devote nearly a decade to this project came only after I had been persuaded to give a paper comparing white supremacy in the United States and South Africa at a session on comparative race relations at the 1972 convention of the American Historical Association. As I plunged into South African historiography, I became fascinated with the extent to which the two national experiences were similar in some respects and different in others. I soon realized that a conference paper would barely scratch the surface of the subject and that I would have to undertake research in South Africa to do it justice. After two years of exploring South African history in the incomparable Herskovitz collection at the Northwestern University Library, I went to South Africa for five months in 1975. I had temporarily narrowed the subject to race relations in the U.S. South (hereafter referred to as "the South") and the Cape Colony of South Africa before 1910, and I therefore spent most of that time doing research in the libraries and archives of Cape Town. The parallels between the growth of white supremacy in the South and the Cape of Good Hope in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were quite strong, and the comparisons could be controlled and precise. As a general rule, comparison works best when the two cases being considered show a demonstrably high degree of similarity.

The first chapter of *White Supremacy*, which deals with the expansion of white settlement in the South and the Cape Colony before 1840, would have fit well into the study as I conceived it in 1975 (as would the subsequent two chapters on slavery and race mixture). Since chapter 1 deals with the relations of European settlers to indigenous peoples,

its American component addresses the experience of Native Americans rather than that of African Americans. I compared the process leading to the forced removal of the “civilized tribes” from the southern states in the 1830s with the events that led up to the Great Trek in South Africa during the same decade. Although I did not pursue the history of Native American–white relations in the remainder of the book, this research and writing aroused my interest in the comparative study of frontiers, which I addressed briefly in the 1980 survey of comparative history. It also formed the subject of a review essay on recent work on American and South African frontiers, published in 1982, which appears as chapter 2 of this collection. Not a great deal has been done on this subject since, except for James Gump’s illuminating comparison of the context and consequences of frontier wars in the 1870s—the conflict between the Sioux and the United States Army on the Great Plains and the clash of the Zulu and British regulars in eastern South Africa.⁷

As the work on *White Supremacy* progressed, however, I concluded that a broader geographical and chronological canvas, one that necessarily involved some sharp contrasts, would more effectively illuminate the historical roots of contemporary U.S. and South African situations than would a more narrow focus on the South and the Cape before 1910. As a result, the last half of the book covers the United States and South Africa as a whole and extends the chronology to the present. The massacre of African teenagers at Soweto in 1976 and the murder of Steve Biko in 1978 horrified much of the world and contributed to my decision to deal more directly with the roots of the current crisis than the more limited comparison would have allowed. I wanted a chance to address more fully the origins and evolution of apartheid and to examine how it compared or contrasted with “the strange career of Jim Crow” in the United States. Although I found that the differences almost overwhelmed the commonalities, I felt that such a study in contrast was a way of countering illusions about the possibility that apartheid might be reformed out of existence, as Jim Crow had been.

In studying a subject like white supremacy it is difficult to avoid thinking about contemporary implications; thus it was a desire to be relevant and topical that, more than anything else, caused the book to overflow the dikes that I had originally constructed to keep it under control. The first three chapters, which were based in part on my intensive research in Cape Town and my prior work on racism in the United States before 1914, were written with more authority and a deeper knowledge of the sources than the last three. The book as a

"It is entirely fitting that the publication of George M. Fredrickson's *The Comparative Imagination* coincided with his presidency of the Organization of American Historians. Both events acknowledge Fredrickson's pathbreaking contributions to comparative history. . . . [Fredrickson] is always readable, often elegant."

VIVIAN BICKFORD-SMITH, *The Journal of American History*

"In *The Comparative Imagination*, George Fredrickson—whose weighty career rests on the comparative study of racial domination in the United States and South Africa—provides a convincing endorsement of the persisting need for comparative analysis. . . . A valuable contribution to the field of comparative studies."

IVAN EVANS, *Contemporary Sociology*

"This new collection of essays proves again that Fredrickson is a master of the practice and theory of comparative history. He explores how and why to employ comparison, as well as its implications for the study of race generally and for the specific contrasts and similarities between South Africa and the United States. The result expands upon his already magisterial contribution, providing a crucial bridge between historical narrative and social science analysis."

ANTHONY W. MARX, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

"South African historians should be grateful that so eminent a scholar has devoted so much attention to their history. Fredrickson writes lucidly and his ideas are always stimulating. . . . No one will be able to read these essays without gaining much food for thought."

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS, *African Studies Quarterly*

GEORGE M. FREDRICKSON is Robinson Professor of United States History at Stanford University, and author of several books, including *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (1995), *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (1988), *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1987), and *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (1971). He was the president of the Organization of American Historians from 1997–98.

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