

How old is racism?

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)

June 21, 2016

It is commonly believed that racism has always existed.

Racism as we know it, it is assumed, has always existed. For most people, the way that we currently divide and categorize humanity is an inevitable consequence of human interaction. In my own experience, this particular way of talking about racism's legacy is especially prevalent among many white Americans who make such claims in response to people naming some sort of unique practice of racially prejudicial oppression that was employed by western European civilization. The response, in one sense, can be seen as a defensive reflex to how many racially minorities within the United States, and the majority peoples that were subjected to colonization globally, have narrated white supremacy. Some of the contention, however, ought not to be dismissed entirely. Many will look at the tribal and ethnic tensions that exist all around the world as a problem as old as human civilization. Isn't this a strong argument for the reality that the racism that was practiced by white/western Europe is indeed just a reflection of what has always been?

There are significant rebuttals to this point.

In response, I and others, would grant them that ethnocentric or tribalistic hostility is indeed an old phenomena. In-group and out-group mentalities are part of [the hidden forces that keep humanity apart](#).^[1] Western Europe certainly did not develop that human problem. However, something peculiar did occur in the West that must be acknowledged as being unique and distinctive in the story of racism. First is the colonial encounters that began in the 15th century. We know the rhyme; "in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Europeans had these early encounters with so-called new world peoples seen through western Christendom gazes. And they saw themselves as the pinnacle achievement of humanity, and everyone else as backwards sinful savages. This history has shaped the long legacy of western

relations with the majority of the world since. The development of the doctrine of discovery, followed also by ideas like manifest destiny, initiated a devastating global settler colonial infestation.[\[2\]](#)

Then, in the 18th century, with a colonizing racial gaze already in place, and the ongoing need to ethically justify such “Christian” behavior, the Enlightenment began to unfold. This was an emphasis on turning to “reason” and the scientific method to answer all our most pressing human questions. Western Europe gained confidence in their own ability to be objective interpreters and catalogers of the world around them. And so they classified everything, from plants to humans, based on their own supposedly objective perspective. It seemed common sense to them that biologically there were different kinds of humans. Through a pseudo-science, that has now been repudiated, they ranked humanity into a racial hierarchy. And to no one’s surprise, they classified white Europeans as the pinnacle of humanity at the top of the hierarchy. White people are superior and supreme. They are the standard for what is right. Likewise, for most people, the Black African, was in their estimation the opposite of whiteness and western civilization. They normally fell at the bottom of the racialized hierarchy. There were some nuances with how others were laddered in this human species breakdown, but in all cases, everyone around the world was inferior to western Europe. This is a quick short-hand of the history, and I encourage you to follow up and read more, but in response to the question of whether racism is old and ancient, one must interject that there is something distinct about the kind of white supremacist racism that arose globally. Especially because of its scientific, theological, and biblical justifications that bolstered it, which I can’t fully unpack in this little post.[\[3\]](#)



Even further nuance is helpful.

I know I have at times made comments make racism itself appear to be a relatively new thing. This is usually through a shorthand comment in the midst of conversation, when one doesn't have time to unpack all the history. Nonetheless, it is probably too lazy as an explanation. With that shorthand reference to its newness, I intend to suggest that the kind of racism that developed, and how it has so deeply shaped our mindsets and human interactions not only in the United States but all around the world is unique and distinct. It is not a repeat of what has gone before. However, in some sense, there is a proto-racial imagination that goes back to ancient thought. For example, as a predecessor to such thought one could look to racialized thinking found in Plato. He said, for example, *"Is it right that Greek states should sell Greeks into slavery? Ought they not rather to do all they can to stop this practice and substitute the custom of sparing their own race, for fear of falling into bondage to foreign nations?"*^[4] This is certainly an early form of racialized thinking. In fact, Cornel West unearthed within modern racist logic a practice of looking back and learning from old Greek standards of beauty as one of its own justifications for western European supremacy as it developed.^[5] Furthermore, my friend [Rodney Thomas](#) who founded [Resist Daily](#),^[6] has begun arguing for the existence of some anti-black racism within some early Christian thinkers. I'm looking forward to learning more about this development and how it helps us better understand ancient and contemporary racism. All that to say, there is evidence of racialized thought prior to the 15th century. So back to where we started. The initial question I began to address was "How old is racism?". Given the continuity and discontinuity we can track historically, we probably need to say that on one hand it is very old, and yet on the other it is also distinctly new. It is ancient and modern. Furthermore, I wouldn't classify all ethnocentrism and tribalism as racism (another point for another day), but if we look carefully we will find proto-racialized logics present well before the 15th century. And yet, the white supremacist racism that has wreaked havoc globally in our modern world is something that the world has never known before.

^[1] "Book," Christena Cleveland, accessed June 22, 2016, <http://www.christenacleveland.com/book/>.

[2] For further reading, see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010).

[3] To understand this better see J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[4] Theophilus, "Plato And Racism," *Ortus Memoria*, October 5, 2010, <https://ortusmemoria.wordpress.com/2010/10/05/plato-and-racism/>.

[5] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Any edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 47-68.

[6] "Start Here," *The Resist Daily*, January 19, 2015, <http://resistdaily.com/start-here/>