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Racism

Albert Memmi, Steve Martinot

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Racism: It is social, not "natural," it is general, not "personal"; and it is tragically effective. In a remarkable meditation on a subject at the troubled center of American life, Albert Memmi investigates racism as social pathology -- a cultural disease that prevails because it allows one segment of society to empower itself at the expense of another. By turns historical, sociological, and autobiographical, Racism moves beyond individual prejudice and taste to engage the broader questions of collective behavior and social responsibility.

The book comprises three sections -- "Description, " "Definition, " and "Treatment" -- in which Memmi delineates racism's causes and hidden workings, examines its close affinity to colonialism, and considers its everyday manifestations over a period of centuries throughout the West. His topics include bigotry against Blacks, anti-Semitism, the meaning of "whiteness, " and the status of the Quebecois.

For Memmi, the structure of racism has four "moments": the insistenc on difference; the negative valuation imposed on those who differ; the generalizing of this negative valuation to an entire group; and the use of generalization to legitimize hostility. Memmi shows how it is not racism's content -- which can change at will -- but its form that gives it such power and tenacity.

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