

# Safundi

The Journal of South African  
and American Comparative Studies

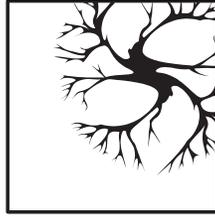
ISSUE 21  
JANUARY 2006

Reflections on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary  
of the Publication of *White Supremacy*

---

George M. Fredrickson  
*Stanford University*

[www.safundi.com](http://www.safundi.com)



## Reflections on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Publication of *White Supremacy*

George M. Fredrickson  
*Stanford University*

**W**hite *Supremacy* was the product of a decade of scholarship and writing. Ten years earlier, in 1971, I published *The Black Image in the White Mind*, essentially a history of white supremacist thought in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before I had definitely decided on another project, I was asked to participate in a session on comparative racism at the 1972 annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Up to this time virtually all comparative historical work on slavery and race relations had involved the United States and one or more Latin American countries. Also appearing in 1971 was Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. Lacking a command of Hispanic languages and having no developed interest in Latin America, I hit upon the idea of presenting a paper at the AHA comparing the history of racial attitudes and policies in the United States and South Africa. My belief that such an endeavor would prove to be fruitful stemmed primarily from my reading of the sociologist Pierre van den Berghe's *Race and Racism*, published in 1967, which had provided me with the concept of *Herrenvolk* democracy as a key to American racial ideologies. Van den Berghe argued that the racial regimes of the United States and South Africa could be distinguished from those of Latin America by their practice of a racially circumscribed democracy or egalitarianism. Having applied this concept to the United States in *The Black Image*, I began to read on South Africa in a search for parallels on which to base my paper. But the richness and complexity of what I found led me to the conclusion that the AHA paper could do no more than scratch the surface of the subject and raise some questions about it. A full exploration of the topic, I realized, would require much more thought and extensive research.

I began my research in the time I could spare from teaching at Northwestern in the excellent Herskovitz Library of African Studies, which is particularly strong in South African materials. At the same time I acquired an excellent introduction to South

African studies by auditing a graduate seminar on South African politics taught jointly by Gwendolyn Carter and Dennis Brutus. Both Gwen and Dennis encouraged me to pursue the book-length study that I was now contemplating. In 1973 I applied for the National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship that enabled me to spend five months doing research in South Africa in 1974, mostly in Cape Town. At that point, I should explain, the project was officially somewhat narrower in scope than the eventual book would be. I defined it as a comparative history of slavery and race relations in the Cape Colony and the U.S. South, and only until 1910. This seemed a quite manageable juxtaposition of areas and periods that had manifested some strong similarities. The cutoff date had the further advantage of enabling me get a visa from the South Africa government entitling me to do research. American scholars desiring to study recent South African developments, such as the implementation of apartheid, were at this time generally refused entry. My direct experience of South Africa yielded a wealth of insights. I was aided in my explorations by a number of South African scholars, who encouraged me and pointed out profitable lines of inquiry. Notable among these aiders and abettors was my good friend Christopher Saunders, now one of the editors of *Safundi*.

I had one unforgettable experience while I was in Cape Town that brought home to me the meaning of apartheid as white privilege and also conveyed a sense of South Africa's racial demography. I got on a double-decker bus and sat on the lower level, which was reserved for whites. Coloureds and Africans climbed aboard and filled the upper level. When no more could be accommodated there, the rest, rather than being permitted to join me on the lower level, were forced to wait on the curb for the next bus. I was left in splendid isolation as the only passenger in the bottom half of an otherwise crowded vehicle.

The writing of the first draft of *White Supremacy* took place in 1977-1978 at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. By this time I had definitely decided to enlarge the scope of the study to include South Africa as a whole and the entire period from early colonization to the present. With invaluable input and guidance from such luminaries of American and South African history as C. Vann Woodward and Leonard Thompson, I prepared a final draft, which was published by Oxford University Press early in 1981. The book was very well received. The week it came out it received a favorable front-page review from David Brion Davis of Yale in the *New York Times Book Review*. *Newsweek* also hailed it shortly after publication. It seemed that I had produced a type of comparative history that was accessible to a wide audience and of general interest, although I had made no conscious effort at popularization. The fact that South Africa and apartheid were very much in the news at the time undoubtedly helped the book draw the attention of the media. (I was on several call-in radio talk shows in the year or so after publication.) Strangely enough the only negative review that I can recall appeared in the *American Historical Review*. (A Latin Americanist, who had no particular knowledge of either United States or South African history, was the author.) The book went on to win the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize for a work in history, philosophy, or religion from Phi Beta Kappa and the Merle Curti Award for Social History from the Organization of American Historians. It was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

It would perhaps not be too much to claim that *White Supremacy* played a substantial role in the growth of interest in the South Africa-United States comparison to

which *Safundi* is now devoted, possibly more than any other single work. It was preceded by Stanley Greenberg's *Race and State in Capitalist Development* in 1980, a study that compared the economic factors behind the establishment of racial orders in South Africa and the state of Alabama during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this valuable study is narrower in focus than *White Supremacy* and did not attract as much attention. If I'm not mistaken, it was never reprinted in paperback and has been out of print for several years. (Greenberg gave up scholarship and went on to have a notable career as a pollster for the Democratic Party.) The year after my book came out, John Cell published *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South*. In many ways a brilliant and provocative study, it has the defect (in my perhaps biased opinion) of operating on such a high level of abstraction that it fails to do justice to the differences between American and South African segregationism. Over the years, before his recent tragic death, John Cell and I had many valuable discussions and exchanges from which we both benefited. On the issue of the nature of segregation in the two societies, I'm clearly the "splitter" and he's "the lumpier." He asked what apartheid and Jim Crow had in common, while I focused on how they differed.

Rereading the book from cover to cover for the first time in many years, I found that most of it stands up fairly well. The Curti Award for "social history," which at the time I found surprising, since I thought of myself as primarily an intellectual historian, now seems warranted. Rather than focusing exclusively or even mainly on the discourse of white supremacy, as I had done in *The Black Image in the White Mind*, *White Supremacy* elucidates the social and economic contexts from which such ideologies emerged. I did not think of it as social history when I was writing it, because at that time the term was mainly reserved for "history from the bottom up" (what is currently known as "subaltern" history) rather than from "the top down" (or from the vantage point of elites and power wielders). What made the work social or sociological history was the extent to which it dealt with structural factors. As the book makes clear, however, I am not a structural or sociological determinist any more than I am simply an historian of ideas and ideologies. I believe that one can understand historical developments and processes only if one studies the interaction of structure (or objective circumstances) and culture (ideas and mentalities) without privileging *a priori* either side of the equation. The ideas about "savagery" and "civilization" that seventeenth century colonists brought with them to North America and South Africa influenced, but did not absolutely predetermine, their relationships with indigenous peoples. The nature of the contacts, and especially the economic character of the relationships that developed, has to be considered, if I can employ the jargon of social science as an "independent variable."

*White Supremacy* was written at a time when the situation in South Africa looked rather bleak and unpromising. The Soweto riots had occurred, but the mass resistance movement of the eighties, associated with the United Democratic Front, had not yet fully emerged. The last paragraph of the book tries to look ahead and is generally pessimistic in its assessment of the future of South African race relations. But it does hold out the possibility that "enlightened self-interest" might induce the white minority to come to terms with the African majority. This in fact is more-or-less what happened after another decade of struggle.

What would I do differently if I were writing this book now instead of twenty-five years ago? I was aware of one main limitation when I wrote the introduction of the work—the fact that it deals only with one side of the story, that of the dominant groups and the apparatus of oppression that they created. It shows what people of color were up against but not how they responded. I called then for comparative studies of resistance to white supremacy and later attempted to provide my own in *Black Liberation*. But comparative social history “from the bottom up” is extraordinarily difficult to write; human experience at the grass roots tends to be very local and particularistic. It’s hard to think of a successful example of such a comparison, although I think that efforts should continue to be made. What may be required are much smaller units of comparisons than entire nations and national histories. Another obvious limitation of the book is its failure to deal adequately with gender. Sexuality is treated in the chapter on miscegenation, but little is said that would shed light on how and to what extent the attitudes and concerns of white women (and their relations with white men) were reflected in the racial order. Again, however, it is hard to think of any more recent comparative work that has managed to do this.

There is also a specific criticism that has appeared in *Safundi* that deserves a response and that I would have to take into account if I were to revise the book. John Higginson and Christoph Strobel have taken me to task for my claim that what they call “unofficial violence” was a principal device for controlling blacks in the post-Civil War United States, but “does not figure prominently” in South Africa, where the police and the military—i.e. the state—could be relied upon to do the dirty work. I will admit that I overstated the case, although I would still maintain that there was a difference in the nature if not perhaps in the extent of such violence. In South Africa there were very few if any sadistic public lynchings before thousands of spectators, or pogrom-type race riots featuring white mobs invading black neighborhoods, such as occurred in several American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My argument that such spectacular public displays of unofficial violence reflected a lack of faith in the efficacy of public authority was first developed in *The Black Image in the White Mind* and was partly attributed to the insecurity about the future of white domination generated by the Reconstruction experience. The extra-legal violence in South Africa, while more extensive than I had realized, did not often assume this public and ritualistic character because whites had more trust in ability of the constituted authorities to deal with what were perceived to be serious threats to white domination.

Perhaps I can conclude by reflecting on the relationship between *White Supremacy* and my more recent comparative work on the United States and South Africa—*Black Liberation*, published in 1995. Here I attempted to deal with the other side of the story—the responses of the victims of white supremacy to the oppression that they experienced. But, for reasons I’ve already suggested, I found myself unable to make this an example of social history “from the bottom up.” There was more variability and specificity than I could handle. I focused rather on the leadership and ideology of the black liberation movements in the two countries. What I found remarkable and somewhat unexpected was the degree of interchange and the number of crosscutting influences. A common context of international Pan-Africanism allowed me to make comparisons between two subplots within a single story rather than between two distinctly different stories. *White*

*Supremacy* began with the common frame of reference provided by European expansionism and the enslavement of nonwhite peoples, but in the last half of the book the comparisons are, for the most part, between analogous developments that are not directly related historically. To my current way of thinking there is something more satisfying about comparative history that shows interactions or cross-fertilizations and not just differences and similarities between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and for that reason I felt that *Black Liberation* was an improvement over *White Supremacy*. But the sequel, although it has been respectfully received, has not had nearly the impact or the success of its predecessor. One reason for this may be that by 1995 South Africa was no longer front-page news in the United States. The attention of the public had moved elsewhere after the end of apartheid. Also the sheer novelty of comparing the United States and South Africa had worn off. If there is a current trend in South Africa-United States comparative studies it takes the form of tracing very specific relationships rather than making broad general comparisons involving the two societies taken in their entirety. I'm thinking of works like James Campbell's *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, also published in 1995, and the writings of Robert Edgar about Garveyism in South Africa. David Anthony's forthcoming biography of Max Yergan, a black American émigré active in South African politics between the world wars, will be another example of this genre. I only hope that the broad picture that I have tried to draw in my two books will provide some context and inspirations for the more detailed and sharply focused studies that are now appearing.