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# The Future Of Whiteness



## Synopsis

White identity is in ferment. White, European Americans living in the United States will soon share an unprecedented experience of slipping below 50% of the population. The impending demographic shifts are already felt in most urban centers and the effect is a national backlash of hyper-mobilized political, and sometimes violent, activism with a stated aim that is simultaneously vague and deadly clear: 'to take our country back.' Meanwhile the spectre of 'minority status' draws closer, and the material advantages of being born white are eroding. This is the political and cultural reality tackled by Linda Martin Alcoff in *The Future of Whiteness*. She argues that whiteness is here to stay, at least for a while, but that half of whites have given up on ideas of white supremacy, and the shared public, material culture is more integrated than ever. More and more, whites are becoming aware of how they appear to non-whites, both at home and abroad, and this is having profound effects on white identity in North America. The young generation of whites today, as well as all those who follow, will have never known a country in which they could take white identity as the unchallenged default that dominates the political, economic and cultural leadership. Change is on the horizon, and the most important battleground is among white people themselves. *The Future of Whiteness* makes no predictions but astutely analyzes the present reaction and evaluates the current signs of turmoil. Beautifully written and cogently argued, the book looks set to spark debate in the field and to illuminate an important area of racial politics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A profound meditation on 'whiteness' — its past, its present, and its possible future - by one of our leading scholars of race. Deftly interweaving theory, autobiography, and her own personal history of antiracist activism, Linda Martin Alcoff has produced the most impressive philosophical exploration ever of this peculiar 'world-historical' social identity." — Charles Mills, Northwestern University "Against the contemporary backdrop of changing racial demographics and widespread condemnation of its relative power and privileges, Linda Alcoff challenges us to think in more nuanced ways about whiteness. This is a compellingly hopeful if sober analysis, offering renewed possibility for a much more modest conception of whiteness, one incorporating a commitment to racial justice as part of its *raison d'être*. *The Future of Whiteness* is a book for our times." — David Goldberg, University of California, Irvine "Written well and cogently argued, *The Future of Whiteness* will spark debate in the field and will illuminate racial politics." — Political Studies Review

Linda Martin Alcoff is Professor of Philosophy at Hunter College

I don't like to overuse the term "white supremacy" but Linda Martin Alcoff's *The Future of Whiteness* is a must-read. We live in the era of white reaction to non-whites getting equal rights, and changing demographics — by 2050 white Europeans will no longer be a majority - have created a frenzy of over-reaction on the right, and some problems on the left too, as Bernie Sanders found out when Black Lives Matter upstaged him and demanded to be heard. When we see white supremacists courted by a major political party, and groups touting "white slavery" and "white genocide," it's time white people take a look at what is going on, and think, perhaps for the first time, about what being white means, what it has meant in the past, and what it will mean in the future. As Alcoff writes, "This is a book about a topic many would rather avoid. It is not an easy subject, racism, particularly when we are assured by the same political party courting white supremacists that we live in a post-racist world (there is a left-wing version of post-racialism too, she argues). There is a lot of white-splaining going on over at Fox News — by white men. I'm a white man, and this offends me. How does a white male of all demographic groups get to tell non-whites how they should feel? Alcoff points to the election of Barack Obama and to "a white reaction that can take some pretty hysterical forms." She says that "holding a significant majority within a nation has granted whites the ability

to believe in the legitimacy of a white-dominated government. I would argue that it goes further than this, to a white “Christian” government, but Alcoff is not interested in the religious question, and you won’t even find it in the index of her book. The subject at hand, I have to admit, is potent enough, and that would make for another book altogether. So we have a “Sturm und Drang” as she says, on the right, but we also have a white-dominated left. And white liberals, she says, “remain uncomfortable in broaching the topic, while white conservatives generally try to disguise their racial references, though the disguise is often so ineffective as to be a joke.” This is an uncomfortable topic for liberals and progressives as well, much as we might want to deny it. I know the suggestion made me uncomfortable in reading it, but it forced me to re-examine my own reactions. Alcoff says that “the extreme unabashed right wing dominates race-talk, while all others, including the left, the liberals, and the moderates, largely maintain race avoidance.” And that was what Bernie Sanders, for example, was accused of “ignoring systemic racism. He had been invited to speak about Social Security and Medicare. His response was a “racial justice platform” that then won praise from the BLM movement. Alcoff doesn’t address Sanders or Black Lives Matter specifically but they seem excellent examples of the forces she is addressing. And Alcoff says we need to talk about this, and she calls the left’s tendency to separate class from race unhelpful in this regard. I thought about this, and I do think it is true that we tend to do that. She points out that “if race is basically an illusion or a mere ideological overlay that mystifies reality, as it is on this mainstream left view then the demographic changes make no real difference, only a difference at the level of ideology.” From the point of view of a liberal, this means that at the very best, even if we are not part of the problem, we are also not part of the solution. Alcoff moves on to a discussion of whiteness, what it is, what it means, and its history, and history shows that whiteness as “moveable” boundaries, as she puts it; Irish and Italians have both had to earn their white status, and she points out that even today southern Europeans and Jews are only “borderline” whites. It’s a bit of a mess isn’t it, this “white” thing? In fact, whiteness is a “historical and social construct” rather than a “singular idea” and it has changed and continues to change. She talks about labels and the changing nature of social identities (given society itself is changing). She employs categories from around the world, including Yugoslavia after its break up, the Mason-Dixon

line, and Rwanda, and offers us a brief history of "race" and a discussion of "class." This is no easy read and it should not be, given the complexity and importance of the subject. It is important we understand these things so that we can intelligently discuss them. These are concepts it is often difficult for us to wrap our thoughts around, even assuming we can come to some agreement on terms. Alcoff's chapter on white exceptionalism is particularly important today, and here she employs William Faulkner to illustrate our contradictory attitudes towards race and white supremacy. Being a philosopher, it is hardly surprising that we should also meet here Newton and Goethe and discussions of universalism versus purity. This is a book that will make you think, and it would have very little value if it simply validated existing attitudes. Because whiteness is not an unchallenged default, this is a subject that should receive our undivided attention. I cannot recommend this book enough. It will challenge your thinking, and I can think of no higher praise.

This is an excellent book. Written for those with a little background in philosophy, its aim is to "help develop an adequate conceptual repertoire" for understanding what whiteness is, as Alcoff notes (p. 37), and to argue for directing its future in certain morally and politically positive directions. In some ways I think that some of the middling and critical reviews posted here on yearn for a some sort of magic antidote to cure the many problems of race, that if only we could make some sort of crucial move everything would be better and we wouldn't have to worry about race anymore. Unfortunately, there isn't any such antidote. Instead, it will take a lot of hard work, patience, and commitment to address its complexities, and we should assume that there will be manifestations of it in the future that we haven't yet anticipated because race is a protean social phenomenon that will continue to evolve as long as there are grounds for it to do so. But grasping more fully what it is will help us to address it better, and Alcoff describes and explains whiteness in ways that are clear and accessible. Is it an easy read? No, not if you are comparing it to People magazine or Donald Trump's speeches. But why would you expect ease of reading in a book analyzing racial whiteness and its prospects for the future? Is it dry and boring? I didn't find it so; Alcoff's use of personal detail, for example, made problems of race quite vivid, and she refers time and again to concrete examples that help illustrate her points. Like most books that aim to take on a serious social problem and carefully analyze it, *The Future of Whiteness* takes a little commitment in terms of time and reflection from its readers, but it repays those commitments by providing valuable insight and understanding. If you are interested in the book's topic, it's definitely worth reading.

This book offers a lot to think about, but it is very dry and boring, and it hits dry and boring before the first section of the book is done. I had a very hard time reading this book. I think it is certainly a timely book; more than ever whites are coming to terms with what it is to be white in an increasingly multicultural population. While for now white majority is intact, already more whites than ever are involved in social justice causes for other races. In the past, white people have just been white without really thinking much about it, but that's changing. The author examines some of this through explorations of her own past social justice history. This book is just very academic, and put me to sleep more times than I can count. It definitely seems well researched though, and if you are expecting more of an academic book, you might really like it.

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