

*Ethics and Race: Past and Present Intersections
and Controversies*

by Naomi Zack

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This book, *Ethics and Race: Past and Present Intersections and Controversies* by Naomi Zack, nutshells philosophical and ethical concepts and applies them to topics of racism through an interdisciplinary lens. “Throughout this book, almost every chapter...[focuses] on racism that shapes life in different segments of society, with the understanding that racism presents ongoing moral problems” (130). The work distinguishes between “social race” and “biological race” as a way to avoid confusing or overlapping both meanings. The use of the term “social race” references the reality of race as practiced; “biological race” references the myth of race as genetically real. Topics covered include racism in daily life; microaggressions; experiences of multi-racialized people; sports; racialized health disparities, including COVID-19; education; criminal justice; policing; natural disasters; international contexts; and ethical dimensions of protest. The presentation and writing style allow space for students to decide for themselves on issues after reading about the different viewpoints. Key words and examples are technically defined in brief within the twenty-four topic-based chapters. Instructional features include a handy glossary, further readings and Internet resources, and chapter questions. The book, however, does not contain citations

in the body of the chapters or in-text citations, which would have been helpful for readers, especially instructors and students.

To provide a sampling, two chapters stand out as particularly salient in terms of current controversies: “Chapter 9: The US Criminal Justice System” and “Chapter 16: Protests from Left and Right.” Chapter 9 on racism and the criminal justice system provides concise and clear explanations on how ethics and race intertwine in significant ways. Mass incarceration, dehumanization, and prison reform are concepts highlighted in the chapter. Zack uses a direct explanatory tone: “the likelihood of a citizen or resident of the United States being imprisoned is five times that of the world average.” She continues: “Compared to the world, every US state has a higher prison population than nearly every other country” (83). The author explains the reasons for the disproportionate incarceration of people of color and directs the reader to look further into ten different prison reform projects. “The student is invited to explore these efforts, evaluate them, and participate if inclined” (84). Prison abolition and ethics are not included as a topic in the chapter, though. The other chapter sure to spark classroom conversation is Chapter 16. The first paragraph of the chapter immediately illuminates the link of protest to ethics:

Protests resemble free speech in exercising a universally recognized democratic right, the right to assemble or get together in the same place. And like free speech in the United States, they are supposed to be legally protected, unless they are violent and incur criminal penalties. This is both a moral and legal norm because nonviolent protests are generally approved of by a wider audience and in democratic countries are not expected to be put down with government force. The content of democratic protests is also usually moral because protesters show up to physically demonstrate their opposition to an injustice that may be lawful as things stand, or to demand just changes in existing law. (149)

The chapter does not take up the arguments for mass revolt or righteous revolution—the destruction of everything in society in order to rebuild from scratch. The author connects leftwing protests to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., for social transformation and rightwing protests to “regressive” aims (150–

151, 153). Fascinatingly, after briefly summarizing several protests that have recently occurred in the last few years, the chapter takes on the question of whether protests successfully work. The author asserts: “Unless people beyond the protests, throughout society, change their ideas and political behavior through how they vote, even huge protests may remain bubbles, both self-contained and suspended above reality” (155).

The book is worth exploring to evaluate whether its topics fit into your teaching or even if a chapter or two may be useful. Some statements you encounter in the book would need further exegesis in a classroom situation because the complexities may be missing, owing to the abbreviated and skimming nature of the writing style. These provide opportunities for creating assignments around the text. The book contains examples from the experiences of multiple ethno-racial communities. The book is lighter on its coverage of Indigenous Peoples and makes a claim that Indigenous identity is based on resistance to the idea of race (173–174). This claim would require more unpacking for students because Indigenous identities can be based on several complicated factors, including recorded ancestor and descendant lineage and “blood-quantum” politics as well as place-based connections. On another note, some of the examples may also be dated, such as a compelling case of mortgage discrimination that occurred in the 1990s, but the course instructor using the book can bring in more current examples (131). Not much consideration is given to the recent work on algorithmic and neoteric racism. The text does not necessarily show strong linkages of the different forms of racism. In fact, Chapter 15 on hate groups quotes a philosopher who equated racism with hate, which also could benefit from further elaboration in terms of newer scholarship on racist love and the connections of interpersonal and individual racism to structural and institutional forms of racism (139).

Overall, the author Naomi Zack is a reputable and well-known scholar, and this book is no exception to that record of scholarship. There definitely are valuable and insightful thought gems that emerge from the text, such as an insightful passage about microaggressions (132–133). This book is worth a look, especially in Liberal Arts and humanities classroom contexts related to racism, social issues, and social justice.