

Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century

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Four years ago I published a review in this journal of a book on *The Origins of Racism in the West*.⁽¹⁾ I would like to begin the analysis of the volume by Bethencourt in the same way in which I began my piece on *The Origins of Racism in the West*, i.e. by quoting a statement I made in a book which I published at the beginning of my career: 'All minorities in all societies in all historical periods have endured hostility from the government and the majority populations in the countries in which they live'.⁽²⁾ This seemed to some scholars at the time a bold and unsubstantiated statement. The vast amount of research I have carried out over the last 20 years, admittedly concentrating (but not exclusively focusing) upon the 19th and 20th centuries, has confirmed my initial belief. The volume which I reviewed for this journal four years ago, with contributions from scholars expert in specific fields and time spans, further supported my findings, by placing the origins of racial prejudice in European classical antiquity, but also coming to the conclusion (especially through an essay by David Nirenberg) that a significant change occurred as a result of the racialization of Spanish blood in the late medieval period, which Bethencourt, essentially an Iberian and, more specifically, a Portuguese specialist, accepts and stresses.

However, there are several significant differences between the book edited by Eliav-Feldon, Isaac and Ziegler and that written by Bethencourt, which I feel I must highlight from the outset. As an edited book *The Origins of Racism in the West* worked because individual scholars wrote about the areas in which they had expertise, meaning that one automatically accepted their findings. In contrast, Bethencourt moves out from his Portuguese and Iberian comfort zone in the early modern period to cover world history since the crusades, which inevitably means that he cannot cover all racisms in the same level of detail or with the same authority. At the same time, he also cannot achieve this task in an even manner in 374 pages (excluding notes and index but, amazingly for a book of this length, without a bibliography: I really hope that the absence of a bibliography is due to constraints imposed by the publisher otherwise this represents a major oversight). There is also the issue of chronology. While *The Origins of Racism in the West* begins in antiquity and ends in the early modern period, *Racisms* starts with the crusades and fades away in the late 20th century by taking us on a whistle stop tour of some of the best known and most violent examples of racial prejudice (including US lynching and Nazi genocide) of the 100 years or so from c1880 (the disintegration of Yugoslavia receives attention in one sentence on p. 371, an indication of the type of summary when dealing with the 20th century). The end point of Bethencourt's narrative receives attention

later. However, at this stage I would like to focus upon the starting point. The second sentence of the book (p. 1) states that: the book ‘challenges recent scholarship, which traces the invention of racism back to classical antiquity’ while in the third sentence Bethencourt ‘rejects the idea of racism as innate phenomenon shared by all humankind’ (*sic*: the book contains more proofreading errors than we would expect). On p. 5 he also rejects the idea of racism as ‘immanent’, an interesting choice of word often used in a theological sense. I would agree with this statement. Even in the most extreme racist societies human contact breaks down racial barriers, as evidenced, to give just one example, of the relationships which developed between German women and foreign workers in Nazi Germany some of which would lead to marriage at the end of the Second World War.(3) Racism is clearly not divinely inspired. On the other hand, any scholar searching for examples of racial or ethnic prejudice in any society in any historical period can find it.

I think that Professor Bethencourt would agree with me because (on pp. 7–8) he provides a precise definition of what he understands as racism which rejects ‘ethnocentrism’. One of the key differences between racism and ethnocentrism lies, he argues, in the fact that the latter can accept outsiders, while the former sets up boundaries based essentially upon a concept of blood, which cannot be crossed, with the outsiders remaining permanently without any hope of salvation, whether in Nazi Germany or early modern Spain, both of which constructed Jews as the main racial enemy. This, to me, seems to imply that racism does not exist in liberal democracy which, as countless scholars have demonstrated, it does.(4) I have recently published a book which uses the idea of ‘multicultural racism’ in reference to British history in the past two centuries.(5) In fact, Bethencourt’s book deals with both the consequences of exclusion and the breaking down of boundaries in many of the examples he uses, especially in the case of the areas conquered by Spain and Portugal in the early modern period. Consequently, even in societies defined by blood, crossing boundaries remains possible. At the same time, liberal societies since the Holocaust, which have rejected concepts of race based on blood, still practice prejudice against ethnic outsiders, particularly immigrants.

Before moving forward I would also like to comment on the ‘methodology’ of the volume. Clearly, we have to accept that those who write books which essentially constitute ‘broad sweeps’ are unlikely to bring many human stories into the narrative. We might view Bethencourt as guilty of this, perhaps, inevitable ‘sin’, but when he does introduce personal stories, often involving visual material, the (sometimes dense) narrative comes to life. I would not agree with him that his ‘book is based largely on the analysis of primary printed and visual sources’ (p. 1), especially by the time we reach the 20th century, by which point they have almost disappeared. Nevertheless, the sections of the book which I found most interesting and rewarding and from which I learnt most, precisely involved the deconstruction of either pictorial or literary sources, which Bethencourt carries out in a highly expert manner. He demonstrates himself equally at ease when dealing with ‘Casta Painting’ in 18th-century Mexico, illustrating racial hierarchies through the visual medium, as when analysing the texts of those who played a role (or not) in the evolution of modern concepts of racism, whether Carl Linnaeus, Charles Darwin or Adolf Hitler, where Bethencourt dissected *Mein Kampf* and perhaps suggests a structure where one does not really exist. Bethencourt demonstrates expertise in analysing a variety of methods of communication, as a result of his multilingualism (which, at the least, encompasses English, Spanish, Portuguese and French) and because he demonstrates himself to be both an art historian and political theorist. The weaker sections of the book consist of those when the primary sources disappear or, at least, fade into the background, when the narrative becomes less interesting and even boring or turgid, especially in the whistle stop tour of the 20th century.

Geographically, Bethencourt demonstrates, the history of racism emanates from Europe, beginning with the crusades and then moving forward with the Iberian conquest of the Americas. However, as he asserts on p. 1: ‘I do not maintain the reality of racism is exclusive to this part of the world; Europe simply provides a relatively consistent setting that will be compared to other parts of the world where similar phenomena have manifested themselves’. The book divides into five sections, beginning with the crusades, which covers 50 pages, in which religion inevitably constitutes the main focus. The longer second part which deals with ‘Oceanic exploration’ and the third on ‘Colonial societies’ sees Bethencourt in his element, focusing upon the research areas in which he has specialised, namely the Portuguese and Spanish Empires, at the, perhaps inevitable, expense of the other European conquerors, whether Holland, France or Britain. The book as a

whole contains a relative lack of material on the last three of these imperial entities for the reason just outlined. Had a French or British specialist written this book it would have taken a different shape and path from that pursued by Bethencourt. Nevertheless, we should welcome this move away from the English- and French-speaking world towards that controlled from Iberia. Less forgivable, however, is the lack of attention devoted to the Ottoman Empire.

The fourth part of the book, on 'Theories of race', takes us away from Iberia and towards northern Europe and the United States in an examination of the ideas of the men who invented and created modern racial ideas. Part five also has a European focus although it tries to do too much and I learnt little from this section. It is the weakest part of the volume. In the two chapters here Bethencourt takes us on a tour of racism throughout the world, which therefore means that we learn little. It is more like an encyclopaedia than a historical narrative. This last section has a glaring gap in that it does not engage with immigration and the racism inherent in the importation of labour in post-Second World War Europe. The Eurocentric focus, which he claims to pursue, really needed to focus upon this issue.

If we examine the structure from a chronological perspective, the volume works well. The second, third and fourth parts of the book succeed because, as I have stressed, Bethencourt writes about what he knows best and does it extremely well. I learnt a lot from the second and third parts especially about the areas of the world controlled by Spain and Portugal. If we can sum up Bethencourt's argument about the origins and development of racism, he essentially regards the starting point and place as consisting of Iberia in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Apart from the fact that notions of the purity of blood emerged in Spain at this time and place, Iberia also represented the take off in European exploration or imperialism or even Eurocentric globalization. The most important contribution which this book makes to the historiography of racism, apart from moving its origins more towards Iberia, is to emphasise that racial categorization developed from the 16th century as Europeans encountered new peoples. This contrasts with much of the Anglocentric literature which has focused upon the imperial encounter as a 19th-century phenomenon consequent upon expansion into Africa and other parts of the globe.⁽⁶⁾ Chapter five on 'Hierarchies of continents and peoples', perhaps the most interesting and innovative in the whole book, proves particularly important in this discussion. Bethencourt argues here that the racial classifications of the world which would become solidified from the 18th century onward initially emerged in a frontispiece (used as the front cover to the present book) to the first Atlas of the world published by Abraham Ortelius in 1571, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, which had reached its 41st edition by 1612. In this illustration Europe is depicted as the racial superior to the other parts of the world in the form of the Americas, Asia and Africa. Bethencourt provides a detailed and convincing analysis of the meanings of the figures used in this particular illustration, with Europe at the top of the hierarchy. Chapter five as a whole demonstrates how the message conveyed in this image spread through the visual arts during subsequent centuries. The chapters which follow in part two then examine views of Africans, Americans, Asians and Europeans, using a wealth of deeply analysed sources. The third section also proves rewarding, covering 'Ethnic classification', 'Ethnic structure', 'Projects and policies', 'Discrimination and segregation' and 'Abolitionism'. Section four then divides into three chapters on 'Classification of humans', 'Scientific racism' and 'Darwin and social evolution', taking us from Linnaeus to the 20th century. Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler receive attention in one of just two chapters covering 'The age of nationalism and beyond'. Examining the original sources produced by these writers, which he deconstructs and analyses in detail, Bethencourt provides an interesting narrative and timeline.

From a thematic point of view the book works best when it deals with racial ideology, a subject in which Bethencourt demonstrates himself expert. As I have previously mentioned, whether dealing with *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* or *Mein Kampf*, Bethencourt explains racial ideas in an incisive, concise and intelligent way, which any undergraduate student could grasp. The book is not, however, about *Racial Theories*, unlike Michael Banton's pioneering study, which in addition touches upon discrimination.⁽⁷⁾ Instead Bethencourt also covers issues of interethnic interaction in all its manifestations from mixed marriages in Mexico in the 18th century to the murder of Jews in 20th-century Europe. Some parts of the narrative also demonstrate the ways in which racism lessens, as in the brief discussion of racial segregation and desegregation in the USA.

There is not enough economics in this book, at least not in an overt sense. Marx is dismissed in 8 lines (pp. 299–300) in a chapter on 'Darwin and social evolution' but this misses the point. Post-war Marxist scholars developed our understanding of the link between capitalism and racism in the evolution of immigration into Europe from the end of the 19th century.⁽⁸⁾ Indeed, there exists a highly respected sociological journal entitled *Race and Class*, which has run since 1959.

As I have already stressed, the major contribution which this book makes is that it moves the genesis of modern racial biologically determined ideology away from the 'modern' period and back towards the 16th century. It also stresses the importance of Spain and Portugal in the evolution of such ideas, both in the Iberian Peninsula and, more importantly, in the Empires which these two states created in the Americas in particular. It clearly demonstrates a link between the age of 'Oceanic Exploration' led by Spain and Portugal and the subsequent development of racial ideas from the 18th century. The narrative works much better when Bethencourt writes about his own areas of expertise, especially in the early modern period, linked with the fact that here he uses and analyses more primary sources, whether visual or written. By the time we arrive at the 20th century these disappear, with the exception of Chamberlain and Hitler, which means that the final two chapters are just descriptions of what Bethencourt regards as the worst manifestations of racism in the 20th century. In order for a consistent narrative to have emerged throughout, Bethencourt needed to devote more attention to this period: put crudely, there are more people alive in the 20th century, meaning more experiences of racism and more sources. We needed more space on this era rather than less. Bethencourt also brings in a discussion of racism in Asia in the last section, partly to demonstrate the impact of European ideas in its evolution. However, he does this in a superficial way using secondary sources. I am afraid that after reading the final page of this book I came away feeling that racism inhabited a different era because biologically determined prejudice has had its day, despite a final paragraph of the book which contains a catalogue of platitudes stating that we do not live in a world free of racism. A proper engagement with immigration towards Europe since 1945 in a book about racism revolving around Europe would have overcome this misrepresentation. The racial ideas which evolved in Empire did not disappear with the collapse of European imperial control during the 20th century. They remain active, in a different form, in the centre, even though the periphery has withered away. I will conclude with one of my opening statements: 'All minorities in all societies in all historical periods have endured hostility from the government and the majority populations in the countries in which they live'. In popular discourse (which, of course, should not determine, but inevitably plays some influence on, academic conceptions) we would describe this as racism, which, I am afraid (whatever word you might use to describe this type of discrimination) is alive and well in contemporary Europe in all manner of ways. Despite its strengths and contribution, this book needed to stress the link between historical and contemporary European 'racism'.

Notes

1. *The Origins of Racism in the West* (Cambridge, 2009). My review can be found at < <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/887> [2]> [accessed 18 August 2014]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Panikos Panayi, *Immigration, Ethnicity and Racism in Britain, 1815–1945* (Manchester, 1994), p. 102. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See for example Jill Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front: Württemberg Under the Nazis* (London, 2006), pp. 278–90. [Back to \(3\)](#)

4. See for example: Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, *Racism* (London, 2003); John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 1989).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism Since c1800* (London, 2010).
[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, for example, Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1978).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (2nd Edition, Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See for example: Stephen Castles and Godula Kossack, *Immigrant Workers and Class Structure in Western Europe* (London, 1973); Lothar Elsner and Joachim Lehmann, *Ausländische Arbeiter unter dem deutschen Imperialismus* (Berlin, 1988).[Back to \(8\)](#)

Other reviews:

LSE Review of Books

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/03/13/book-review-racisms-from-the-crusades-to-the-twentieth-century/> [3]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/racisms-from-the-crusades-to-the-twentieth-century-by-francisco-bethencourt-book-review-9065365.html> [4]

Standpoint

<http://standpointmag.co.uk/books-december-13-a-history-of-blood-hatred-christie-davies-racisms-francisco-bethencourt> [5]

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/01/long-roots-racial-prejudice-and-american-colonialism> [6]

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Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/88489>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/887>

[3] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/03/13/book-review-racisms-from-the-crusades-to-the-twentieth-century/>

[4] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/racisms-from-the-crusades-to-the-twentieth-century-by-francisco-bethencourt-book-review-9065365.html>

[5] <http://standpointmag.co.uk/books-december-13-a-history-of-blood-hatred-christie-davies-racisms-francisco-bethencourt?page=0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C1>

[6] <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/01/long-roots-racial-prejudice-and-american-colonialism>