

# Reviews

## Racisms: from the Crusades to the twentieth century

By Francisco Bethencourt. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 444. Hardback £31.95, ISBN 978-0-691-15526-5; paperback £22.95, ISBN 978-0-691-16975-0.

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This is a learned and lavishly produced work, written for a broad audience, about the historical origins of one of humankind's most harmful and persistent ills. It offers a condensed and generally lucid survey of the many waves of discrimination, segregation, and persecution in world history, with a special emphasis on the West. This emphasis is from the late medieval period to our own times; Bethencourt does not really accept that there was racism in Antiquity and early Islam, and so these are covered briefly. The work proceeds in a sober manner, with a fine eye for significant details, variations, and results. Bethencourt's own field is the Iberian world – Spain and Portugal from the Middle Ages onward, and the Portuguese and Spanish empires – but his judgement on other regions and periods is sound and balanced, based on up-to-date research. The footnotes contain massive learning. This book, therefore, is recommended reading for anyone interested in the subject.

It is in discussing the reconquest of Iberia and the crusades that the author comes into his own. All major areas of ethnic and religious conflict and interaction are discussed in chronological order, with a great deal of attention paid to European activities in Africa, the Americas, and Asia in Parts II and III of the work. The development of racist theory and ideology are treated in Part IV. Part V, on 'The impact of nationalism', is devoted to the twentieth century.

That said, the work is an attempt to review the essence of racism at a conceptual level. Regrettably, I find the attempt unconvincing. This is not so much because I disagree with it, but because it lacks precision and coherence. Bethencourt defines racism as 'prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action' (p. 1). This phrase means that every form of group prejudice focusing on descent is racism, which is untenable. It would mean, for instance, that the Old Testament is full of racism. Prejudice concerning ethnic descent is at least as old as the art of writing. A further definition, or rather description, by Bethencourt follows (pp. 7–8), which is not helpful because it is insufficiently precise and tries to cover too much.

The complementary element of action is a matter of debate. Bethencourt claims that 'The issue remains that prejudice related to ethnic descent does not sufficiently identify racism; such prejudice must be coupled with discriminatory action' (p. 8). This is questionable at several levels. Not all prejudice

related to ethnic descent is racist by nature. The postulate that racism exists only when there is discriminatory action is untenable. It would justify the absurd conclusion that intellectuals who have formulated clearly racist ideas, such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel, were not racists because their ideas were not accompanied by acts. As regards the pre-medieval periods, Bethencourt ignores the fact that we are faced in these with slave-holding societies. Slavery, obviously, is a practical reality. The question is then whether large-scale slavery was justified by arguments that approach racism. I myself have argued that this was the case in both Greece and Rome. Bethencourt refers to my book contending that racism goes back to Antiquity (p. 3). It is only fair to list various other authors who have argued along similar or related lines.<sup>1</sup>

The essential hypothesis of this work is that ‘racism is triggered by political projects and connected to specific economic conditions’ (p. 6). Also, as stated in its conclusion, ‘In all the significant cases I have studied, prejudices concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory actions have been motivated by political projects’ (p. 365). This conclusion fails to distinguish between racist conflict and other forms of conflict between groups – religious, social, economic, and even plain political. This is not to deny, of course, that racist conflict has been exploited, reinforced, and sharpened by political forces.

1 C. Delacampagne, *L’Invention du racisme. Antiquité et Moyen Age*, Paris: Fayard, 1983; D. K. Buell, *Why this new race: ethnic reasoning in early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; D. Goldenberg, *The curse of Ham: race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004; M. Eliav-Feldon, B. Isaac, and J. Ziegler, *The origins of racism in the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, notably the papers by D. Goldenberg, D. K. Buell, R. Bartlett, P. Biller, C. de Miramon, D. Nirenberg, R. Po-Chia Hsia, and A. Pagden; recently D. E. McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity and its legacy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Racism has been a welcome tool for the wrong sort of politicians and political movements, as we all know, but its ultimate origins are not those of political pamphlets or actions. Nor can it be maintained that specific economic conditions are a prerequisite for racism. Racism represents a perverse way of looking at society that infects intellectual and social life at many levels, politics being only one of them. It is a social pathology that finds its expression, among other things, in publications, in written and other forms. It justifies aggression, but remains racism even if there is no actual aggression.

The historical development of racist politics is described in the work as follows: ‘nationalism brought with it the fusion of nation with race, with collective identity based on the idea of a shared language and descent’ (p. 369). While this may be true in some historical situations, as a general pronouncement it is untenable. It would mean that, according to Bethencourt, Herodotus and Thucydides, who wrote in the fifth century BCE, were racists – in spirit, if not in fact, for he recognizes only published opinion combined with action, not published opinion alone as a genuine form of racism. These two authors state that being Greek represents a combination of language, descent, culture, and religion. That in itself does not justify a conclusion that they were racists.

As is appropriate in a work such as this, religious conflict, discrimination, and persecution play a huge role. ‘Islam speared the idea of holy war’, Bethencourt says; ‘The idea of holy war as a personal and collective duty was alien to the Christian tradition’ (p. 19). He therefore argues that the Crusades as an idea were inspired by Islam. That seems farfetched. There is plenty of evidence of religious warfare in Judaism and Christianity preceding the Crusades. Generally speaking, one of the numerous lessons to be learned from this impressive work is how difficult it is

to evaluate the fluid margins of racism and other forms of group prejudice in religious conflict.

I conclude, therefore, that Bethencourt defines racism in a sense that is both too narrow and too broad – or vague – and consequently both excludes and includes historical episodes on the basis of mistaken criteria. While this is an impressive and learned work that has much to offer, at a conceptual level I maintain that he fails to prove his views. In the rich bibliography there is hardly any reference to authoritative modern works on racism.<sup>2</sup> Since Bethencourt himself also has eccentric and provocative ideas and theories, the reader should have been made aware of the varied and diverse current literature that exists. It is only fair to end this review by emphasizing once again that my essential disagreement about what racism was and is does not affect my admiration for the remarkable scholarship to be found on every page of this fascinating work.

2 A small selection of significant works that are not mentioned: L. Poliakov, *The Aryan myth: a history of racist and nationalist ideas in Europe*, trans. E. Howard, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996 (translation of the French from 1971); L. Poliakov, *Le Racisme*, Paris: Seghers, 1976; M. Banton, *The idea of race*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1977; Albert Memmi, *Le Racisme. Description, définition, traitement*, Paris: Gallimard, 1982; L. L. Cavalli-Sforza, Paolo Menozzi, and Alberto Piazza, *The history and geography of human genes*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994; Martin Bulmer and John Solomos, eds., *Racism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; R. Bernasconi and T. L. Lott, eds., *The idea of race*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 2000; C. Delacampagne, *Une histoire du racisme. Des origines à nos jours*, Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000 (trans. into German by Ursula Vones-Liebenstein as *Die Geschichte des Rassismus*, Düsseldorf: Artemis und Winkler, 2005; C. Loring Brace, 'Race' is a four-letter word: the genesis of the concept, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

### **Bondage: labor and rights in Eurasia from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries**

By Alessandro Stanziani. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014. Pp. x + 258. Hardback £75.00, ISBN 978-1-78238-250-8; paperback £22.00, ISBN 978-1-78533-035-3.

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*Bondage* is a critical assessment of the well-known thesis in global economic history that 'capitalist economic growth' and 'free labour' emerged in an interdependent fashion in western Europe 'from the eighteenth century to our own time', whereas coerced labour and obstacles to economic growth persisted in eastern Europe, especially Russia (p. 2). The book attributes this thesis to the 'liberal and Marxist historiographies' (*ibid.*), according to which, 'Free labor is said to form the basis of capitalist economic growth, whereas forced labor is said to explain the economic backwardness of Russia' (*ibid.*). The corollary that serfdom was the epitome of unfree labour is 'synonymous with either demographic decline or arrested economic or technological development' (p. 55). Labour bondage, according to this reading of European history, is a pre-industrial system and an obstacle to industrialization.

Stanziani subjects this thesis to a sharp and energetic critique consisting of five key propositions. First, it is necessary for historians to distance themselves 'from liberal, as well as Marxist and Weberian, definitions of capitalism' and 'to show that capitalism cannot be associated with wage labor and "proletarians"' (p. 7). True proletarians did not emerge until the second Industrial Revolution. Second, until the 1870s and the emergence of nineteenth-century labour movements, workers in western Europe were not as free as we might think. Third, workers in Russia were not as unfree as we