and that we “have a lot to be troubled about”. Contemporaries’ movement of peoples, political fragmentation and environ-
mental catastrophe are individually and socially corrosive: “Place is the fabric of our lives; memory and identity are stitched through it. Without heroes, because of one’s own, a place that is home, freedom is an empty word”. Bonnett’s brilliant, pertinent, quirky odyssey leads eventually to “Hog’s Back Lay-By”, where “we could read, with no more trouble than we had in the past, the tales of the land and the sea”, says Sumira. The Psalter Map, London, c.1265, British Library, London.


Western weed DAVID ARMITAGE
Francisco Bethencourt

Racisms, like nationalism, seems to be at once ancient and modern. Debates over the history of nationalism pit “primor-
dialists”, who trace it back to the Israelites, against “modernists”, who see it arising as a political force only after the French and Indus-
trial Revolutions. Primordialists students of racism find it far back in the ancient world among the Greeks; their modernist counter-
parts argue for origins in the emergent human sciences of the Enlightenment. Few -isms excite more passion about their invention or greater disagreement about their birth. Is there a middle way? Or do we just need a better explanatory framework?

The title of Francisco Bethencourt’s masterly new book suggests just such a model for elucidating the history of racism: Racisms in the plural not the singular, anonymized in all their contingency rather than assumed to be a singular outgrowth of human nature itself. His subtitle – “From the Crusades to the twentieth century” – also points to a middle way in the Middle Ages, Bethencourt tracks the ramifications of racism across almost a millennium, delving no deeper into the past or any closer to the present. Much hangs on what he means by racism, of course: not just any form of intolerance based on heritable difference among groups, but much more precisely, “prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action”. With this definition in mind, he confidently locates racism’s origins, its proliferation and its slow demise – or, at least, the decline of the formal racism that is “linked to political pro-
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overwhelmed or submerged native peoples, and where slavery systems left their most toxic legacies. The western hemisphere remains the region most scarred and stratified by the residues of racism.

The deed came before the word; racial theory only arose after centuries of practical racism. Once “scientific” racism had entered an unholy alliance with blood-and-soil nationalism in the nineteenth century, the conditions were in place for the invention, not merely the project of systematic ethnic exploitation. As Bethencourt reminds us, some 12 million foreign clerks entered slave labour in Germany between 1939 and 1945: a figure comparable to the number of Africans enslaved over the 350 years of the Atlantic slave trade.

This modern murderousness had relatively modest medieval beginnings. Like Benzon Netanyahu, David Nirenberg and other recent scholars, Bethencourt locates racism’s origins in Iberia – his own area of specialty, as a leading historian of the Portuguese empire – in communities where converted Jews and Muslims lived cheek by jowl with Old Christians. An inclusive universalism was the foundation of Christianity – “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all in one Christ Jesus”, Paul wrote in Galatians 3: 28 – but pressures in the peninsula on resources of status and wealth raised barriers against New Christians. The exclusion of Moriscos (converted Muslims) became “the first crucial case (alongside that of converted Jews) in the Christian community of a persistent internal divide based on the position of descent”, where Christians discriminated against fellow Christians on grounds of ethnicity rather than belief.

This example clarifies Bethencourt’s choice of criteria. No theory of race was needed to justify exclusion from ecclesiastical office, for instance. Phenotypic markers like skin colour played no part: converted Jews were physically indistinguishable from their Old Christian neighbours. Discrimination arose from intimacy, not distance. And class played an important role in cementing the economic dominance of low-status members of an in-group against a threateningly adjacent out-group, as it would later in the American South.

The long-term result, in Iberia at least, was a series of purity-of-blood statutes first promulgated in 1449 and not abolished until 1835–70. Not every later instance of racism would have the same features: Bethencourt admits that persecution of the Roma stemmed mostly from their mobility, not their settled proximity. His conception of relational racism still illuminates more than it obscures in the dark history of human prejudice over the longue durée.

The bulk of Racisms catalogues the ingenuity of Europeans and Euro-Americans in their treatment of those they sought to exclude, oppress, exploit or exterminate. Bethencourt’s tone in treating the crimes and follies of humankind is unfailingly cool and analytically sophisticated. His long and detailed book is a syllabus of horrors; in the hands of a less experienced or less sophisticated reader will be appalled at human ingenuity when ethnicity is at stake.

Bethencourt’s achievement is to show that racism, in all its forms, was contextual and ultimately reformable, not innate and hence inevitable. The reader’s journey to that conclusion is grim but necessary, as Bethencourt circles the globe in search of his examples. He argues that when Jerusalem ceased to be the centre of their mental maps, Europeans could start to structure the world’s peoples within novel hierarchies of continents, peoples and civilizations. Depending on the balance of numbers, European colonial societies tolerated race-mixing, set barriers to miscenogenation, or managed the problem. The legacies of these strategies prompted the question that initially suggested Bethencourt’s study: “How is it that a person can be considered black in the United States, colored in the Caribbean or South Africa, and white in Brazil?”

In search of answers to this conundrum, Bethencourt tacks deftly between cultural and social history. His binocular vision marks Racisms out from most previous studies of its subject, which have either examined racism as ideas in the mind or as facts on the ground. Unlike many students of Western racism, Bethencourt pays little attention to its biblical underpinnings: the division of the world into three “races”, Hamitic, Semitic and Japhetic (derived from the three sons of Noah), does not even appear in his index, though it pops up occasionally in the text. Practices and perceptions rather than arguments structure much of his story: racism’s textual traces attract little of Bethencourt’s attention until he reaches the eighteenth century.

Iconography occupies much more space in Racisms than intellectual history. (It must be said that Bethencourt’s press has not served him well here: Racisms is handsomely produced, but its illustrations are murky and visual examples are not always reproduced alongside treatments in the text.) Bethencourt is an acute reader of representations of the four parts of the World on Sicilian tombs and Italian fountains, in the frontispieces of atlases and on the ceilings of palazzi, to illustrate how imagery propagated hierarchy, sometimes for centuries, as the same representations endlessly circulated through the mechanisms of print culture. And his treatment of eighteenth-century Spanish American caste (casta) paintings, with their variegated images of every possible combination of mixed-race ethnicities, convincingly shows their malleability: language, hairstyle and clothing could all change perceptions of ethnicity. Their shifting categories were a long way from later conceptions of immutable racism: more treatment of early racial photographs, like those created on Louis Agassiz’s 1865-6 Harvard expedition to Brazil, would have confirmed this point. Yet in regard to visual evidence, as in other areas, Bethencourt’s negative findings are as important as his positive results in the search for racism’s tangled roots.

Mobility characterized racism as Europeans transported it from continent to continent. Spaniards found natives they called “Moors” in the Americas; later, the British encountered “blacks” and “Indians” in early Australia. Laboratories of racism also existed within Europe long after the Middle Ages: as Bethencourt notes in his account of Carolus Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century primitivist and taxonomist, “Lapland was indeed the Swedish West Indies”, its Sami peoples as intriguing to northern ethnographers as the Caribs had been to the European inventors from Columbus onwards. Racism was nonetheless unevenly distributed. The Americas were the matrix of post-medieval discrimination, which held greater purchase there than in Africa or elsewhere in Africa, as a result of European colonialism faced more competition and failed to take root so deeply. Only Oceania escapes Bethencourt’s panorama, even though the region was shot through with exclusionary iconographies by the early nineteenth century, not least in “New Guinea” and “Melanesia”.

Bethencourt’s long-range view – deep in time, wide in space – puts much familiar turning points in the global history of racism into novel perspective. The anti-slavery movement did little, at least in the medium term, to diminish prejudices and discriminatory action. More generally, while scientific racism was quite compatible intellectually with anti-slavery, as in the case of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a supporter of abolition and yet also the inventor of enduring racial categories such as the “Caucasian”. The account of the rise of racial theory in Racisms is encyclopedic in its coverage as one thinker follows another from Kant to Agassiz and Charles Darwin, but their contributions came late in the history of racism, not as its intellectual inspiration.

More ambitiously, Bethencourt draws out racism’s purpose in combating egalitarianism in Europe after 1848, in cementing racial inequality in the United States and in promoting European incursions into Asia. He rightly notes the paradox that the expansion of democ- ratic nationalism fomented racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Little wonder, then, that indigenous peoples across the globe looked back nostalgically to times when they were guaranteed privileges within a república de Indios or could petition a monarch for protection against land-hungry settlers and crooks.

When Bethencourt reaches the past hundred years or so, the examples of the Jewish pogroms in Russia, the Armenian genocide and the Nazi racial state amply confirm his hypothesis: “race” is the high god of the modern age. After his broad, complex narrative, these modern instances appear not as paradigmatic horrors arising from eternal hatreds, but instead as the culmination of many moments of contingent discrimination. “There is no cumulative and linear racism,” he insists; even Iberia, once the cradle of racism itself, had little anti-Semiticism in the modern period owing to its small, residual communities.

Race lingers in census categories and self-identifications long after any significant biological basis for it has been exploded. The dream of a post-racial society is far from being achieved anywhere in the world, even in such apparently homogeneous communities as Japan or Iceland. And politically motivated acts of ethnic discrimination and destruction have continued, in Rwanda in 1994 and in Gujarat in 2002. These are among the latest acts in racism’s destructive history.

Racisms is a profound, and racism is indeed conjunctural rather than bred in the human bone, they could be among the last. Racisms breeds hope that racism is eradicable, at least formally and collectively, even though the durability of racial prejudice persists. Such hope. Racism may not be age-old, but nor is it just skin-deep.