Francisco Bethencourt

Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. xiv + 444 pp. (Cloth us\$ 39.50)

This beautifully produced and richly illustrated book is a complex cross between an erudite essay on Western ideas about cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial differences, and a detailed accounting of European history and European contact with the rest of the world since the Middle Ages, although the author also extends his analysis to include some discussion of prejudice and discrimination in Africa and Asia as well. Bethencourt emphasizes the existence of various forms of racism, which explains the use of the plural in the title, and he underlines throughout the text the specific historical contexts and power relationships that lie beneath the multiple types of racisms. His definition of racism as “prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action” (p. 3) includes discriminations based on ethnicity, language, culture, religion, nationality, and phenotype. He argues that racisms long preceded the development in the nineteenth century of a “scientific” concept of race, the subject to which he devotes much of the last quarter of the book. His principal contribution to the discussion of the history of scientific racism is to tie its impact to the rise of nationalism and ethnic differences not only in Europe, but in Asia and Africa as well.

Rather than *Racisms* the book might have been called “differences,” or “distinctions,” since Bethencourt’s definition of racism is so broad and inclusive, but in fact, the idea that certain immutable or inherent characteristics could be ascribed to groups based on characteristics other than “race” has been part of the literature on prejudice and discrimination for a long time. In fact, Bethencourt makes clear that the conceptualization of his book was made in dialog with George Fredrickson’s 2001 book, *Racism: A Short History*. He criticizes Fredrickson for his schematic generalizations based on secondary literature, his concentration on Jews and Africans, and his failure to see the impact of nineteenth-century nationalisms on racist thinking. Nevertheless, Bethencourt’s ideas about the impact of religious and ethnic prejudices as a form of racism have much in common with Fredrickson’s argument, which emphasized the conflation of race and ethnicity. Bethencourt sees his task, however, as providing the specific historical contexts and examples of discriminated groups like the Armenians not included in the earlier study. That effort explains the method and structure of the book as well as its inclusion of long sections on the general history of Europe and European overseas expansion as necessary context for understanding the changing nature and variety of the prejudicial discriminations that he calls racisms.

Essentialism lies at the heart of Bethencourt's definition of racism. If characteristics could be inherited through blood, or milk (a secondary aspect of transference that he does not discuss), or even birth in particular climatic zones or under certain skies, then negative traits or conditions like barbarism, or even intellectual dispositions like heresy were immutable and justified discriminatory treatment. This essentialism is the parallel that justifies the inclusion of such attitudes as forms of racism, but it would have been useful if more analysis had been devoted to the ways in which ethnic and religious prejudices in places like sixteenth-century Brazil, seventeenth-century Virginia, and eighteenth-century Jamaica and St. Domingue were mobilized and legalized in the case to create the racism built on phenotype and the justifications for slavery, that is, to examine the influence of the earlier varieties of religious and cultural perceptions on the emergence of biological race as a category.

Throughout the book, much of the discussion centers on taxonomies, etymologies, representations, and definitions, and on the operation of discriminatory legal systems. Bethencourt incorporates an impressively wide reading of the extensive bibliography on this subject across time and space. The book concentrates on the structures and norms of discrimination, and is far less concerned with the actual operation of racial systems and their quotidian complexities. Thus there are aspects of the story of racism that receive much less attention. Take for example, the considerable evidence that in Latin America and in various other parts of the world racial classifications were not based exclusively on "race" or phenotype, and that wealth, status, occupation, and other criteria often contributed to racial categorization. Moreover, a person's racial status often changed over time either by self-identification or because of a changing position dependent on wealth or marriage or some other social characteristic. Thus taxonomies do not capture the instability and complexity of racial systems.

One of the most novel aspects of this volume is Bethencourt's analysis of images of ethnicity and race. His learned discussion of this material demonstrates considerable command of the approaches of art history. The dependence on visual evidence while novel and illuminating in a general history is not, however, without certain challenges. Documentary evidence always presents interpretative problems and visual or iconographic materials are no less laden with difficulties. Take for example his discussion of the so-called *casta* images from Spanish America that depict the results of miscegenation in domestic scenes of mixed race families. Bethencourt believes the hundred or so sets of these canvases indicate "a colonial society worried about the definition of internal frontiers" (p. 165), and he tries to resolve his statement with the seeming contradiction that the apparent market for these sets of 12–16 paint-

ings were not the local elites, but the colonial administrators, curious about the complex racial taxonomies and fascinated by American exoticism. After all, local elites, the only people in the colonies who had the funds to pay for (or the wall-space to hang) the sets, did not need to commission artists to portray *castas*. The paintings seem to be more about Spanish concerns with exoticism and taxonomy than with a colonial reality, and despite Bethencourt's explanation this genre of images remains problematical.

Regardless of such interpretative challenges, *Racisms* provides a sweeping history of discrimination and prejudice that links these practices to ethnic differences and political power in an elegant and learned global history of one of the world's most persistent problems.

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