

## *The thousand faces of racism*

As mil faces do racismo

Las mil caras del racismo

Les milliers de visages du racisme

Ronaldo Vainfas[1]

**BETHENCOURT, Francisco. *Racisms: from de Crusades to the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton and Oxford University Press, 2013. 443 p.**

Francisco Bethencourt is a very well-known author among researchers of modern history from his work *O imaginário da magia* to the books *História da expansão portuguesa* (a collection organized in partnership with Kirti Chaudhuri) and *História das inquisições*. The latter made him known to the broader public with the Brazilian edition published by Companhia das Letras (2000). Having worked as a director of the National Library of Lisbon and the Gulbenkian Cultural Centre in Paris, he currently holds the Charles Boxer Chair at King's College, London.

He is an important historian, whose work has received international recognition and has been published in several languages in addition to Portuguese, the native language of the author. Since the publication of *O imaginário da magia*, Bethencourt has looked for original themes, theoretical and historiographical controversy, and painstaking interpretations. In his inaugural book, he explored a nearly untouched theme in Portuguese historiography, although often studied by European and American historians since the end of the 1960s. The author has been a pioneer in the study of Portuguese witchcraft and sorcery, a theme dear to the history of mentalities. This was a great innovation at that time, considering the closeness of the Lusitanian historiography either to the factual history without problematics or to the comprehensive interpretations of Marxist-Braudelian inspiration.

Bethencourt did not walk alone in this crusade, as several contemporaries also opened new paths at that time. It is the intellectual generation that witnessed the *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution), final milestone of the Salazar regime in Portugal, during their youth. Not surprisingly, many historians who were contemporaries of Francisco Bethencourt narrowed ties in the 1980s with young Brazilian historians, several of them who were

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absorbed in the research of Portuguese sources about colonial Brazil at that time. There was, then, an affinity of research interests and similar concerns on the theoretical-methodological field, in addition to a certain political kinship: the generation of Francisco flourished along with the “carnations” of the Portuguese revolution; in our case, the generation of Laura de Mello e Souza, in which I include myself, flourished amid the crisis of the military regime that ruled Brazil for about 20 years.

Francisco Bethencourt still bears the trademark of this rebellion cultivated in his youth. I would say that he is a historian of the repressions and oppressions in Western history. The discourses, the devices, the ideas, the practices: these aspects have been present in his work from the first book to the recent *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*.

The book, published jointly by Oxford University Press and Princeton University Press, is of great immediate interest. While racism has been a part of everyday life for centuries in the countries that once integrated the colonial empires, in developed countries, despite the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis, many xenophobic, racist, and neo-Nazi movements have reappeared. There is a bit of everything, from everyday violence against workers from African, Turkish, or Arabic origins to offenses against black or *mestizo* athletes in soccer games.

In the introductory essay, the author starts from a seemingly simple question, which enlightens, however, the mutability of the racist intention according to the cultural tradition of the countries or regions of the world. The question is: “how can the same person be considered black in the United States, of mixed race (white or not) in the Caribbean or in South Africa, and white in Brazil?”

From that point, Bethencourt discusses issues about several historical incidents of racism, preparing the reader for the idea developed in the overall work. For example, he mentions the familiar contrast (discussed by Donald Pierson and Oracy Nogueira) between the “origin prejudice”, typical of the United States, and the “brand prejudice”, typical of Brazil, against people of African descent: in the first case, the criterion is the individual’s ancestry; in the second, his color.

The “color prejudice”, by the way, is a benchmark in this work, as it universalized in various ways, being used as a criterion for racial debasement of individuals in various societies of the world. But when did this criterion appeared, when did it get acclaimed? The book explores the subject extensively. On the other hand, the author points out quite well that the color did not have any influence on the largest racial persecution of all time: of the Jews in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Was that a racial or religious persecution? How to explain the paradox? The color did not have and still does not have any influence on African fratricides, from ancient to present. Tribal disputes arising from hatred between lineages, as the one between the *Hutus* and *Tutsis* in Rwanda (1994), seem to have been decisive in this case. For those who think that racial prejudice (rooted in

the color or the African origin) is a unique notion of the West — philosophy of several antiracist movements — the case of Rwanda works as a rebuttal. The Armenian genocide perpetrated by Turkish Ottoman Empire during World War I works in a similar way. How to explain it?

The book addresses these and other serious issues throughout its 443 pages. Bethencourt is certainly careful to define the terms and concepts that he uses in the work. He is very faithful to his choices. First of all, the author clarifies that the existence of discrimination or racial segregation does not necessarily result in official policies of extermination. It is worth emphasizing that this difference should be considered by Brazilian militants/organizations that see a “genocide” of the Africans trafficked as slaves to Brazil.

Another relevant contrast is the one that differentiates “legal” (institutionalized) racism from “informal” (everyday) racism. In the first case, a telling example is the segregation of the Jews in Nazi Germany and of the blacks in apartheid South Africa or in the United States until the 1970s. In the second case, a good example is the Brazilian racism, known as which is said to be of mark’s prejudice, in opposition to an origin prejudice, “brand”, or the various European racisms that molested Africans, Turks, and other immigrants since the 20<sup>th</sup> century (in this case, it is more of an “origin” prejudice than a “brand” one, although the latter is not absent).

At the conceptual level, the differentiation between ethnocentrism, racism, and genocide is highlighted.

Ethnocentrism, as we know, implies disdain or repulse toward a particular community — or toward every community except itself — but does not exclude the possibility of including individuals from rejected communities. Such repulse can be observed in tribal societies, such as the *tupinambás*, in 16<sup>th</sup> century Brazil, even between villages of the same ethnic group. That has not stopped many “opponents” from being incorporated, as it was the case of João Ramalho, in São Vicente, and Diogo Álvares, the *Caramuru*, in Bahia.

Racism, however, is an attitude, whether legally sanctioned or not, that affects a minority or a specific group (religious or ethnic), because of its ancestry or the “blood” that runs through the veins of each individual of that minority or group. Racism, warns the author, usually leads to informal or institutional segregations, but does not always result in the extermination of the “Other”.

Genocide, in its turn, is the more recent concept that the author uses, because it was only defined in 1948 by the United Nations (UN) as “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic or religious group”. The genocide presupposes racism, but cannot be mistaken for it.

A big problem faced by intellectuals who devote themselves to themes such as racism, segregation, or racial persecution lies in the status of the concept of “race”. This is a concept that has its own story — like all concepts — sometimes used to “praise” certain groups, other times to “make them feel inferior”. Contrary to the common perception, the term “race” referred very few times to biopsychological inherited characters throughout history. It is a

typical elaboration of the “raciology” from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a sibling of the Physical Anthropology and cousin of the Ethnology of “primitive societies”. In most of the Western history, and in that can be included much of the Eastern history, the notion of race referred first to the lineage (ancestry/descent) of a particular ethnic, cultural, or religious group — a criterion, let us say, proto-ethnologic, fundamentally empirical, without any theory behind it (of course), but always with ethnocentric intention. The notion of “race” in various societies, from several periods, at times implied the existence of racism, but sometimes it did not, which led Francisco Bethencourt to defend that “race” and “racism” are not historically matching or convergent terms.

In any case, the concept of race, in the biologizing sense, was condemned by the UN in 1948, owing to the policy of extermination practiced by the Third Reich, with permanent marks on the Human Sciences. That poses a perplexing paradox: is it possible to study racism(s), rejecting, *in limine*, the legitimacy of the root word “race”? In the field of politics, how to deny the concept of race, and, at the same time, denounce, with all the right motives, the “racial” segregations and persecutions?

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Francisco Bethencourt sees no other way out but to adopt the concept of “ethnicity” as a substitute for the term “race”. He bases his choice on philology — a highlight of the book — recalling that the term *ethnicus* (pagan, gentile) was coined by the Latins in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, from the term *ethnos* used by the Greeks to name a “nation” or “race” with specific characters— in the lineage or ethnological sense. Bethencourt says that the word “ethnicity” instead of “race” enables him to combine the notions of identity and otherness, without implying racial prejudice. Although he does not solve the dilemma of defining “racism without race”, I fully agree with the argument.

The richness of the questions posed in the introduction of the book is tested in the long study that, as stated in its subtitle, stretches from the Crusades to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This duration is very long and very audacious as well. The superlatives are justified. In *Racisms*, the author focuses on Western representations and discursive practices (written or imagistic) but is not limited by them. He studies racisms in Africa, Asia, certainly in plural, for obvious reasons. The target of the studied racisms is therefore widely varied (another necessary superlative) regarding geography, cultural tradition, and historical conjuncture. As for the timeframe, it comprises almost a thousand years, from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first part discusses the concepts of race and racism outlined in the West since the crisis of the Roman Empire until the late Middle Ages. The author mentions the load of prejudice that, with the beginning of the Germanic invasions, fell upon the Goths, Franks, Lombards, from then on included in the category of “barbarians”: a derivation of the Greek notion that stigmatized people who did not speak Greek and had different habits as barbaric, an idea that was adopted by the Romans. This was a more cultural than racial racism (although there is controversy on this subject) that acquired “ethnic” senses through the association between “barbarism” and cruelty, ignorance, and irrational destruction. The ultimate example can be seen in the generalization of the term “vandal” (designation of one of the peoples that breached the frontiers of the Roman Empire), even today used to describe destructive acts or groups.

The author continues to examine the Western prejudices prevailing in the Middle Ages, increasingly “racial”, against the Muslims that invaded the Iberian Peninsula in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. He comments on the pejorative sense of the terms “Saracen” and “Moor” in the Western vocabulary as well as the prejudices, perhaps more subtle, of the Muslims against Christians and Jews in areas dominated by Islam. However, he does not omit the Western prejudices. In the case of the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, established in the first crusade (11<sup>th</sup> century), the prejudices resulted in explicit segregation, besides persecutions and murders.

The thesis of this first part, anchored in the relevant literature, stresses the importance of the “universalism” of the Church as a theoretical basis of a type of racism that would have a long duration. A faith-based racism, in which being a Christian or not defined the boundary between the *ego* and the *alter*. It is almost a prelude to the hierarchy constructed between continents amid the European maritime expansion. Bethencourt remembers the other side of the coin: the integrative vocation of Christian universalism expressed, among other examples, the “Africanization” of one of the Three Wise Men.

The following section goes by the same route, but is denser. It addresses the “ocean exploration”, and the author is an *expert* in this theme. In it, we can find the construction, through multiple sources, of a racist line of thought associated with the European expansion and the ranking of the people involved, according to regions. The famous frontispiece of *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), from Abraão Ortelius, cosmographer of Filipe II, sets the tone of the chapter with the embodiment of the continents (in a feminine representation, which is noteworthy). Europe reigns supreme at the top, and Asia and Africa, just below it, are symmetrical. America is at the bottom; and the woman that represents it, in Greek style, leaning on the side of the pedestal that supports Asia, holds the head of a man (beheaded). A reference to cannibalism.

Cannibalism is one of the themes that the author examines carefully, comparing interpretations and controversies related to such custom (mainly

the *tupinambá*) in the Western context. There is also a chapter on the Africans, that is, on the elaboration of prejudices that would persist for a long time, such as submission or incivility, all tinted with reassuring representations, which were actually rare. The narrative continues with the representations about the Asians, showing that the Japanese and Chinese, unlike the Indians or Africans, were often described in a positive manner by Portuguese chroniclers. Racism against Muslims, Turks, and Moors (descendants of Muslims converted to Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula) is also analyzed in this part, which ends with the problem of the Iberian New Christians.

Bethencourt closely examines the massive conversion of Sephardic Jews, first in Spain and then in Portugal. Those processes, each at their own way and at their own pace, are linked to the establishment of the Iberian inquisitions. This is a question of major relevance in a book devoted to the historical study of racisms — in the plural — simply because it was the first case of racism toward ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory policy actions.

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The third part discusses the colonial societies in America, Africa, and Asia. The most interesting section refers to the “painting of castes”, thriving in 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish America, and to its relation with the construction of a society that, although of mixed race (or because of miscegenation), seemed marked by Iberian ideal of “purity of blood”. The historical-philological examination of categories such as *crioulo*, *cafuzo*, and *mulato*, among other mixtures, exemplifies discourses that, as Antonio Candido would say, produced “Baroque transfigurations”.

The author compares models of social stratification in the Iberian, English, Dutch, and French colonies, all in a panoramic view. He examines more carefully the weight of slavery in the social stratification of the colonies that depended on African labor and concludes the section with brief considerations on the Abolitionism in the Age of Enlightenment.

The fourth part, in brief, focuses on the emergence of the raciological model of racism. The starting point is the classification system of species, work of the Swedish scientist Carlos Lineu, in particular the system related to the “animal kingdom”. This naturalistic and scientific model, transported to the study of societies, was one of the big inspirations of the “raciology”, which consolidated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bethencourt analyzes studies of many authors, from

the naturalists to the first scientific ethnographers, sometimes authors who combine the two disciplines in their studies. This is a good summary of the subject, attentive to the subtleties of the relationship between natural science, ethnology, and social Darwinism. Among the specific topics of the section, we highlight Gobineau's condemnation of miscegenation, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the racist consequences of the post-civil war period in the United States, with the founding of Ku Klux Klan, and the emergence of "Arianism" as a doctrine, which the European science would soon incorporate.

In the fifth part, the author discusses a key aspect in the history of racism: the relationship between eugenics, race, and nationalism. He exposes the emergence of several exclusion policies or campaigns or the stigmatization of "races" considered incompatible with national ancestry. Those were invented traditions that, I believe, opposed the "assimilative" policies adopted in several countries since Napoleon. In the case of the Jews, assimilation advanced greatly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Germany itself, various states of the German Confederation granted citizenship to Jews even before unification.

However, according to Bethencourt, the trend that prevailed was the "deputation", sometimes violent, as it was the case of the Russian *pogroms* against the Jews. In the Turkish Ottoman Empire, the massacre of Armenians is another evidence of racial intolerance. The outbreak itself of World War I in 1914, which was sparked by the attack of a Serbian group against the heir to the Austrian throne, as we know, has to do with the project of "Greater Serbia" and the ideals of pan-Slavism (supported by Czarist Russia, of course) against the Austro-Hungarian empire. This was perhaps the best example of "mosaic of nationalities" (thus, of "racial minorities") under the same state authority.

The climax of this part could be no other than the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, extended to nearly all Europe with the outbreak of World War II. A persecution anchored in raciology, in Arianism, and in exacerbated nationalism — a type of racism that was at the same time biologizing and mythical. Bethencourt examines the origins of Hitler's anti-Semitism (for instance, the work of Houston Chamberlain), the ideas of *Mein Kampf* and their importance in the national-socialist program. He goes on to inform us about the progressive exclusion of the Jews that lived in the country from German citizenship, the deportations, the ghettos, until the Holocaust. It is a typical case in which there was an association of the scientific raciology, then a modern concept, with the traditional condemnation of ethnic ancestry, resulting in the segregation and in the genocidal project.

In a nutshell, this is a valuable book on a crucial contemporary issue, which truly lacked a historical synthesis. Bethencourt does it combining a panoramic vision with a vertical analysis of key topics, besides presenting intriguing questions. The richness of the information is formidable; the logic of the argument irreproachable.

The combination of the search for synthesis and detailed analysis of particular cases is, however, at the same time, the salient feature and the "Achilles

heel” of the book. This happened because, when the author investigated the construction of racism, which obviously varies according to the society and the period, at an interval of a thousand years, he was forced (and I believe he did it with *gusto*) to face the numerous specificities that the large time frame required. Not rarely, in the chapters of each section, the author opens up many shortcuts to contextualize the period and the studied society, to indicate the relevant historical facts, to summarize the intellectual formation of important authors — and much more. Sometimes, he suffers from an excess of information; at other times (rarer), from an absence of it. There are topics in the book where the quantity and extent of the shortcuts rival with the main reflections, eclipsing the main narrative, blurring it a few degrees.

The analyses of the key topics, which are precious in general, and the panoramic view that surrounds each one of them, sometimes reach the desirable depth and pertinence; at other times, they are superficial. Not the ideas, but the way they are demonstrated. A time frame of this magnitude, of course, would risk producing uneven approaches. They would be denser at points where the author’s familiarity with the literature and the subtheme itself are clear. In the opposite situation, the approaches would be less dense. A calculated risk?

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Some themes are addressed very swiftly, such as abolitionism and its implications in concrete socio-racial processes. The vast literature, classical or recent, is mainly European and North American. It certainly provides a sufficient base for the author’s argumentation. But the absence of at least some recent literature produced in the countries that were analyzed is worth mentioning. In the Brazilian case, which I know better, the omission is shocking. In other Latin American cases, I missed some top researchers. Some interpretations would be better off with these perspectives, I believe. But this was a choice of the author, who always preferred Hispanists or Brazilianists. He must have his reasons.

To the eyes of experts in each topic, among the various discussed by the author, Bethencourt’s book may not offer great novelty. But I am sure that the author has not written for historians dealing in this or other micro themes, but to a wider audience. It is also not for the “general public”, in the



general sense, because this is a sophisticated book, but for an intellectual audience of several areas of sciences, humanities, arts, and politics. If so, the book fulfills its purpose to the full.

In any case, academicism aside, the book deserves to be translated into several languages, to be read and consulted by all those who wish to understand and combat racism. It is a committed book, not in the vulgar sense of dwelling on worn out words of order or releasing sterile accusations against mythical enemies — which barely conceals a type of reverse racism, the rhetoric *vendetta*.

The great message, the great thesis of the book, combines the humanistic spirit of the author with the skill of his craft as a historian. Bethencourt studies racism to deconstruct its identity as a monolithic, anodyne, ideological entity. He deconstructs it not to deny its existence, of course, but to reconstruct it in its historical diversity. Hence, the concept title is in the plural form, “racisms”. After all, racism is like the devil: it exists *ab origine*, does creative metamorphoses, promotes assemblies, and aggregates uniformed or anonymous followers. Sometimes it triumphs, as in Holocaust in Europe, at other times it is defeated. Today it lies defeated, criminalized, and illegitimate almost everywhere in the world. But you never know.