‘Race, racism, and racists have been with us since the dawn of time.’ Thus began a paper which this reviewer once received from an undergraduate student. While such a statement proves grossly incorrect from either a scientific or a biblical understanding of the universe, it does bespeak a sense of futility many people across the world experience when meditating upon the subject of racial animosity—the firm belief that tribalism occupies a fundamental section of the human psyche, not to be overcome with public diversity initiatives. Indeed, human beings do seem to possess a cognitive architecture that facilitates the formation of racial and ethnic categories; the political scientist Henry E. Hale described the concept of ethnicity as a psychological mechanism for reducing uncertainty in the social world by the production of easy group stereotypes. So are the fatalists therefore correct that, even if racism did not emerge from the dawn of time, we might be dealing with it until the end of history?

Francisco Bethencourt would argue such cognitive mechanisms cannot entirely explain the human behavior known as racism, for ‘throughout history, racism as prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action has been motivated by political projects’ (p.1). In other words, the desire for political or economic dominance dictates the shape of racist ideology, depending upon the ideas in currency—which is why racial classifications have proven so fluid and variable through history. Bethencourt’s book Racisms works to remove the ‘essence’ so regularly attributed to ideas of race and replace that with a focus upon the political goals that have historically underlain the implementation of racist ideologies. Specifically, this book focuses upon the European experience in the world at large, from the Crusades through the colonial experience in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and down to the twentieth-century disaster of ethnic nationalism.

After briefly surveying Classical Greek, Roman, and Muslim attitudes regarding difference in human phenotypes, Bethencourt delves into the Crusades, a colonial experience in which Latin Christians confronted an array of ethnic and religious ‘others,’ from Jews and Muslims to Orthodox Christians. The relative integration or segregation of conquered communities in European-controlled areas largely depended upon the relative immediacy of any Muslim military threat, while the general encounter with so many communities led to the development of criteria for identifying various ethnicities, based not only upon descent but also customs (especially manner of dress), language, religion, and law. European oceanic exploration and the establishment of European colonies across the world led not only to a personification of the continents and their inhabitants but also to a production of exoticism, which ‘was an inherent element in European expansion’ by ‘downgrading other cultures and justifying political dominion wherever it was established’ (p.76). Moreover, where

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Medieval Christian universalism had made potential converts and subjects of all peoples, the implementation of the slave trade in Africa, and tropes of cannibalism and idolatry in the Americas, for example, when combined with recurrent suspicion of religious backsliding among converts, helped give rise to a hardening of racial and ethnic classification that undermined previous universalism. In Iberia, ‘purity of blood’ statutes helped to limit economic and political competition from Jewish and Muslim converts by ‘relegating these people to the bottom of society, even though in some cases their financial resources would have put them well above this level’ (p.150).

Colonial society ‘functioned as laboratory for the classification of human beings and their development through interracial pairing,’ and though these classifications initially remained locally defined, such hierarchies—increasingly dominated by phenotype features—were ‘later expanded to a world scale’ (p.171). Bethencourt surveys the various models of racial identification around the world, from the strict black/white dichotomy of the United States (dependent upon ongoing slavery) to the more multi-form structures established elsewhere, as well as how these models informed patterns of spatial segregation, civil rights laws, and the abolitionist movement. The author has a keen eye for significant details, such as how ethnic mixing in Dutch operations in India may have resulted from the non-aristocratic social origins of Dutch governors and captains, or how the weak urbanization of British colonies in North America served to preserve ethnic homogeneity and keep slaves under control. The last 120 pages cover the emergence of scientific racialism and nationalism—well-trod ground, to be sure, though Bethencourt quite pithily captures the absurdity of racial scapegoating, observing that, in Nazi Germany, Jews, for example, were described alternately as ‘liberals but also Marxists, capitalists yet at the same time socialists, exploiters of the working class and organizers of trade unions’ (p.324). A final chapter touches in brief upon post–World War II developments, as well as practices of identity-based discrimination in Asia, such as the Indian caste system or the Japanese Burakumin communities, thereby giving a nod to non-European practices of classification that many scholars include under the rubric of race.

Bethencourt has done an admirable job sifting through history to produce this broad survey of the evolution of racial thought, always tying each development back to the political projects it was meant to facilitate and thereby illustrating the emptiness of race as an ontological category. Racisms not only pulls regularly from primary sources, such as travel narratives or scientific reports, but it is also richly peppered with images that bring to life the shifting perception of race through the centuries; from the depiction of Asians and Africans in Renaissance art to eighteenth-century Mexican ‘castas’ paintings. The persistence of racism is no mystery, no stain lying at the heart of humankind, but rather a mechanism whereby some groups achieve or maintain political power. Recognizing that is the first step in undoing this terrible legacy, especially in this era when racist ideologies refuse to remain as dead as so many well-meaning people have declared them. Bethencourt’s sophisticated survey of racism’s past is needed in order to confront its present and future manifestations.