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The Inquisition in the Early Modern World: Thirty Years of Exchange

A Inquisição no mundo na época moderna: trinta anos de diálogo

L'Inquisition dans le monde à l'époque moderne: trente ans en dialogue

Francisco Bethencourt



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THE INQUISITION IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD: THIRTY YEARS OF EXCHANGE

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This essay analyses the context in which I produced a comparative study, based on primary sources, of the Inquisition in Southern Europe and on other continents from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The main questions, methods and arguments I used are discussed here, as well as the study's publication in several languages and its reception in various countries. The purpose is to reflect on historiography, seen as a collective enterprise moved forward by individual efforts, although always checked and challenged, and on its public impact. I shall focus not only on the continuous process of exchange as the basis of knowledge, but also on changes in time and place that create new needs for historical research and new paradigms for the latter.

Keywords: Inquisition, heresy, representations, system of values, macro-micro analysis, comparative history.

Resumo (PT) no final do artigo. Résumé (FR) en fin d'article.

The Inquisition: A Global History 1478-1834 was the result of an in-depth revision of the PhD dissertation I presented to the European University Institute in 1992. The original text was written in French and was published by Fayard in 1995. The Portuguese version, written in parallel with the French revision, was published in Portugal by Círculo de Leitores in 1994 and in Brazil by Companhia das Letras in 2000. Federico Palomo translated the original into a Spanish version which was published by Akal in 1997. Finally, I revised and updated the text for an English translation by Jean Birrell that was published by Cambridge University Press in their *Past and Present* series, in 2009, under the title *The Inquisition. A Global History, 1478-1834*.

Why was the Inquisition, established between the 1470s and the 1540s in Iberia, extended to the Iberian empires; and why, having undergone reorganisation in Italy in the 1540s, did it last for three centuries? How did it root itself in different social and ethnic environments? What cultural, social and political changes led to its abolition? These are the questions

that guided my research, concentrated in the three years from 1988 to 1991. I benefited from a previous period of ten years of almost daily work in the National Archives of Portugal and in the national libraries based in Lisbon, Madrid and Paris, where I read the main contributions to the bibliography on the Inquisition. In the 1980s, I followed the courses and seminars of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho in Lisbon, Jean Delumeau and Pierre Bourdieu at the Collège de France, and Roger Chartier at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. The comparative approach I found in the work of these scholars was reinforced in the course of my research at the European University Institute in Florence, where I interacted with Daniel Roche, Robert Rowland, Gisela Bock, and Steven Lukes, among others. I worked in the archives of Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, Venice, Bologna, Modena, and Udine, and when I was Frances Yates Fellow at the Warburg Institute, in the British Library. Thus, I broke away from the nationally focused framework that still structures the majority of historical research projects in the world.

The scope of the research, from the foundation (or reorganisation) of the Inquisition tribunals to their abolition, presented serious challenges since I wanted to work with primary sources from the archives. I had already consulted and analysed many hundreds of Inquisition trials, first for a database I created with colleagues at the Gulbenkian Institute of Science, then for my MA dissertation on sixteenth century witchcraft and sorcery in Portugal. The MA resulted in my first book (Bethencourt 1987 and 2004), based on an analysis of 100 Inquisition trials, plus literature, treatises on medicine and canon law. The book was my first experiment in producing history from below, drawing on readings of anthropology (Evans-Pritchard), philosophy (Ernst Cassirer), mythology (Georges Dumézil) and sociology (Pierre Bourdieu), to name just a few of the authors who influenced me. This study of the role of magic opened my mind to alternative cultural traditions that dealt in metamorphosis, divination and the manipulation of individual wills, and which shaped behaviour across sixteenth century society, from rural areas to the royal court.

Although enquiry into the practice of magic was not a priority for the Inquisition, I came to understand that the search for a pact with the devil had shaped many confessions. From this, I could reconstitute the popular vision of the innate powers of magicians, opposed by the belief in demons of the inquisitors, who refused to see anything other than the influence of the devil. It became clear to me that those formulating the interrogatories could manipulate the declarations of both the accused and the witnesses. I decided then to change the focus of my work to the Inquisition itself,

since the Inquisitors' powers of defining heresy and persecuting minorities seemed to have had such an impact on early modern societies. Moreover, I decided to carry out comparative research. Jean Delumeau's question in private conversation – But what is specific about magic in Portugal? – alerted me to the perils of geographically limited research. I would address the common features and specific impact of the Inquisition in different parts of the world.

After formulating the main questions that would guide my research, the first decision concerned selecting the appropriate inquisitorial sources. It would have been easy for me to work on trials, since I had accumulated a large experience in that area. However, I knew that any research based on trials would be impressionistic. Henry Charles Lea had done it in the early twentieth century (1906-1907), when people in the English-speaking world knew very little about the tribunals of faith. Lea demonstrated the vast range of heresies dealt with under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, e.g. relapsing into Judaism or Islam, embracing Protestantism, formulating heretical propositions, becoming an *Alumbrado*, committing bigamy, committing sodomy, voicing superstitions, soliciting in the confessional, and embracing Freemasonry. I could not repeat that kind of approach. Instead of analysing individual trials, I decided to engage in the quantitative analysis of trials to understand successive adaptations of the institution to changing times and local circumstances. I worked with lists of *Autos da Fé* and inventories of trials made as part of the Inquisition process. Gustav Henningsen and Jaime Contreras (1986) in Spain and José Veiga Torres (1978) in Portugal had opened the way. I also knew that there was a vast range of other sources that could be useful for my work, some of them scarcely used by previous historians.

My readings on the sociology and psychology of organisations (e.g. Jeffrey Alexandre, Michel Crozier, Henry Mintzberg, Herbert Simon, Edgar Schein) were crucial to my understanding of hierarchies, norms, regulations, communication, decision-making, and the assertion of power through visits of inspection. The analysis of the plans of prisons revealed the different power structures and different possibilities for action supported by variations in architecture, particularly striking when comparing Roman and Iberian buildings. A prosopography of the inquisitors, which had started with those working in Spain, was an obvious tool for understanding their origins, career trajectory and accumulation of jobs in both the secular and ecclesiastic fields. The external power of the inquisitors, or their collective status, became more visible through the main rituals of the tribunals – foundation, investiture, edicts of faith, visits of district, *Autos da Fé* (non-

existent in Italy, except for Sicily, which was under Spanish rule) – and analysis of these was enlightened by my readings of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Max Gluckman, Erving Goffman, Giuseppe Cocchiara, Van Gennep, and Marcel Mauss. Conflicting representations of the Inquisition produced by the tribunals and their opponents in manuals, hagiographies, sermons, anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim works, treatises against heresy, legislation, images, accounts, chronicles, memoirs, essays, pamphlets and polemical works were available to me for systematic study. I also engaged with the process of abolishing the Inquisition in different countries to understand changes in systems of values promoted both by contemporary literature and by plural political action pushed by the masses and by the elites.

The main argument of the book is that the Inquisition played a crucial role in the Catholic Reformation, imposing its own members as candidates in papal elections, contributing decisively to the reorganisation of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in southern Europe and the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth and part of the seventeenth century (many bishops and cardinals came from the ranks of its members), defining orthodoxy, censoring books and controlling the behaviour of all ordained members of the Church. The Inquisition was used as an extraordinary tool by a faction within the Catholic Church to impose their vision of doctrine. The inquisitors also managed to impose their values on society: the tribunals of faith formed the most powerful disciplinary institution in the early modern world, responsible for 300,000 trials and over 1.5 million denunciations. The tribunals were extended from southern Europe to the Iberian colonial world as a tool for religious control and reinforcement of values. The Inquisition perpetuated itself as an evolving body, with those responsible for it eager to enlarge their jurisdiction, to influence political decisions and to frame the daily life of populations. The decline of the Inquisition resulted from the ideal of tolerance created in Protestant countries to deal with their own dissensions, which slowly changed the European system of values. In that development, the Inquisition was used as a counter-example to prove that religion could not be imposed. Religious consciousness ended up being perceived as a private matter, not public; but this required massive political action in the Catholic countries. The abolition of the Inquisition was the result of military intervention in some cases, rulers' decision or revolution, in others, reflecting changes in the system of values in Europe by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

My decision to write a comprehensive history of the Inquisition in different countries and on different continents was a risky bet in the context

of a PhD, but it was made possible by the progress of national, regional and local studies during the 1970s and 1980s. I benefited from long conversations with Joaquim Romero Magalhães in Portugal, Anita Novinsky and Laura de Mello e Souza in Brazil, Jean-Pierre Dedieu, Jaime Contreras and Ricardo García Cárcel in Spain, Adriano Prospero and Andrea Del Col in Italy, Nicholas Davidson in England, and Johannes Michael Scholz in Germany. I presented my work in progress in various seminars in these countries, and this eventually contributed to shaping my book. I remember the useful comments made by Elizabeth McGrath at the Warburg Institute director's seminar, and the sharp points made by Elena Fasano Gaurini at the seminar on early modern history in Pisa. The former contributed to my specializing in the iconography of the Inquisition (and later of racism) and the latter drew attention to the limits of an approach based on rituals. Robert Rowland asked me the right questions and accepted the resulting enlargement of my project at the EUI. Bartolomé Bennassar, who had played a crucial role in the new wave of Inquisition studies in Spain in the 1970s and 1980s, proved to be the most engaging member of the PhD committee in Florence. He fully understood the originality of the work and supported its publication in France. Denis Maraval, director of Fayard, revealed an enquiring mind that helped to clarify obscure aspects of the manuscript.

Political atmosphere matters: as Marc Bloch said, we always ask questions of the past that relate to the problems of the present. I had been involved in the Portuguese revolution of 1974, which brought to a close a dictatorship of 48 years, while Spain had made its transition to democracy in the years immediately following despite a traumatic memory of civil war, and Italy was coming out of the "years of lead" characterised by far-left and far-right terrorism. Some historians were interested in studying forms of political and religious persecution in the past. I became fascinated by the early modern period, because it embodied a long-term conflict between old and new values, the diffusion of capitalism within feudalism, the use of free labour alongside slaves and bondservants, and the emergence of global connections. It was surprising to see how an institution like the Inquisition had managed to establish a hold over populations in peripheral territories. The idea of loosely organised states and largely untouched areas living in relative autarky did not square with this disciplinary institution that had been devised to reach distant small towns and villages in the deep countryside.

Intellectual atmosphere also matters. I was part of the post-Marxist generation that found inspiration not only in the classic texts of Max Weber and Georg Simmel, but also in the new theoretical paradigms suggested by Pierre Bourdieu, Norbert Elias, and Erving Goffman, in which structural

analysis was tempered by a change of focus to the interaction of social groups and individuals. Symbolic interactionism, for example, implied the re-evaluation of symbols and rites as social constructs that provided orientation and meaning at all levels. Symbols could not be considered as part of a superstructure; rather, they were actively involved in shaping social and economic life. My reading of Elias (1991) and Karl Polanyi (1944) made me reject the idea of separate social spheres of action, such as the economic sphere, and accept the idea of interdependence and asymmetric balances of power. My interest in macro analysis in history, based on the notions of world systems and world economies then promoted by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974-1989), with their problems of Eurocentrism, and Fernand Braudel (1979), more comprehensive, was balanced by the emergence of microhistory, a concept promoted by Carlo Ginzburg and similarly minded researchers. My history of the Inquisitions was situated mid-way between macro and micro analysis, a global study across continents that could rest on many case-study vignettes involving specific individuals.

A simple change in the angle of approach has multiple implications for historical research. The shift from an individual to a collective study of trials helped me to understand that the tribunals were not created, in the early modern period, from bottom up, responding to an increase in the incidence of heresy, as traditional (and then functionalist) history had stated. The number and complexity of tribunals did not grow due to the number of heresies; but massive persecution of accused created conditions for a huge number of trials that justified the own existence of the tribunals and fuelled their assertion within the Church and in the face of other, temporal powers. The trials of the Inquisition, as Carlo Ginzburg (1972) had already noted, must be read against the grain, in a spirit critical of the numerous stereotypical declarations that responded to interrogatories put to the accused under duress. The *Autos da Fé* were not an innocent public ceremony of the institution, but were a mechanism of power, defined by the forced abjuration of the condemned, by the execution of the excommunicated (by the secular arm), and by their and their families' humiliation, which was extended by the publication of lists of condemned people and the hanging of *sambenitos* (ceremonial dress) inscribed with their names and heresies in their parish church. The hasty completion of trials for presentations in *Autos da Fé*, and the transfer of prisoners from one tribunal to another to enlarge the numbers in politically important places, confirmed this argument. Moreover, there were instances in which councils of the Inquisition required local tribunals to pursue confiscation of property – a move that was financially motivated.

The novelty of the book can therefore be seen as its contribution in four areas: comprehensive and comparative coverage in time and place, guided by global questions; arguments concerning the longevity of the Inquisition and its impact on different social and political environments, including the reasons for its abolition; the use of new angles of approach, for example through rites, etiquette, emblems and representations, some of which had been touched on before but not developed in a systematic way; and the extent to which it drew on a wide range of primary sources to answer the main questions.

The book's translation into different languages, and its publication in different countries, give an indication of the significance of its reception. It is difficult to reconstitute its citations on Google Scholar, and the numbers differed according to the language of publication, ranging from a minimum of 941 to several thousands. There were dozens of reviews in major journals and newspapers, and the book was reviewed at length by Philippe-Jean Catinchi (1995) at the literary supplement of *Le Monde* (it made the front page) when it was published in France. The novelty of its comparative coverage was acknowledged by all the reviewers, many of whom had experience of working on the Inquisition themselves. Particularly generous in their praise were Edward Peters (1997), William Monter (1996) and Jaime Contreras (1999). Stephen Haliczer (1998) noted that my take on the Roman Inquisition should have been enlarged, and he was right. I developed that dimension in the English revised edition, benefiting from recent publications by Andrea Del Col (2006), Elena Brambilla (2006) and Elena Bonora (1998), among others. Haliczer also noted that I had not taken on board the most recent developments in research into the issue of purity of blood, an omission that stayed with me. There was also some criticism, particularly by Christopher Black (2010), that I had not engaged with individual trials, and that I should have developed further my analysis of inquisitorial procedure; but these approaches would not have answered the main questions that guided my work.

The English edition, like the others, received good reviews; but while the book was very well received in continental Europe and the Americas, being mentioned in virtually all subsequent studies of the Inquisition in different countries, I had a strange review in the United Kingdom by Peter Marshall (2010), a historian of religious topics, although one who had never worked on the Inquisition. Marshall opposed my approach to the Inquisition as a mechanism of power and questioned its importance; but he gave no evidence to support this ideological stance, his only concrete criticism being a refutation of my statement that four popes elected in the

sixteenth century had previously been inquisitors. As a matter of fact, there were not four but five: Adrian VI (1522-23), Paul IV (1555-59), Pius V (1566-72), Sixtus V (1585-86), and Urban VII (1590). Perhaps Marshall was influenced by another British historian, Henry Kamen (1997), who had published three versions of his book on the Inquisition, at first presenting his subject as a crucial institution, but later taking a diametrically opposed position from which he judged it to be of limited significance. In any case, I discovered that the Inquisition had become an embarrassing issue in the United Kingdom, where Eamon Duffy (1992), a Cambridge historian of Irish origin, and his followers had re-evaluated the Catholic Church before the Reformation as being, at the local level, a lively and creative institution that fell victim to top-down suppression. This unease on the part of some British historians – the Inquisition is absent from most UK university modules on religious history – contrasted with the open apology of Pope John Paul II to all victims of the Inquisition. Moreover, the atmosphere in the Vatican is totally relaxed as regards the Inquisition, and I have felt at home working in the archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, opened in 1998.

Our work as historians is much more individualistic than that of scientists, but we depend on continual exchanges of information and ideas with our colleagues. My work on the Inquisition responded to a new wave of studies in Spain and Portugal in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s that was defined by the authors already mentioned, and also by I. S. Révah (1975), António José Saraiva (1985), António Borges Coelho (1987), Elvira Mea (1997), Gustav Henningsen (1980), Martínez Millán, López Vela, Pardo Tomás and others who contributed to the first and second volumes of the *Historia de la Inquisición en España y América* edited by Joaquín Pérez Villanueva and Bartolomé Escandell Bonet (1984-2000). Publications in Italy in this area gained momentum a bit later, from the 1980s onward; and besides the authors already mentioned, I must highlight the role of Massimo Firpo (1992), who published and analysed crucial prosecutions brought against bishops and cardinals of the Roman Inquisition. Developments in the historiography of the world outside the Inquisition were obviously important: I benefited from extensive discussions with Diogo Ramada Curto in Lisbon, with whom I shared projects and edited a series of books for publishers Difel which ensured that Carlo Ginzburg, Peter Burke, Roger Chartier, Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, and many other authors were translated into Portuguese for the first time. José Pedro Paiva contacted me while I was working on the history of witchcraft and sorcery and we initiated a dialogue on historical issues that is still going on today.

I also continue to enjoy fruitful exchanges with other acquaintances, such as Elena Bonora and Fernanda Olival, whom I encountered working in the archives.

The Inquisition. A Global History, 1478-1834 is still in print in the different countries where it was published, which is a good sign. Meanwhile, further studies of the Inquisition have brought about important development that have partly been the result of dialogue with the book. I highlight here the excellent books by Ana Isabel López-Salazar Codes (2011), who has clarified the political involvement of the Portuguese Inquisition; José Pedro Paiva (2011), who has studied relations between the Inquisition and the bishops; Giuseppe Marcocci (2004), who has researched the first period of the Inquisition and has written, with José Pedro Paiva, the important *História da Inquisição Portuguesa, 1536-1821* (2014); Stefania Pastore (2003), who has produced one of the best studies of the Spanish Inquisition by seeing it as part of the development of confessionalisation; the third volume of the *História de la Inquisición en España y América*, which has developed our knowledge of the institutional framework, prosopography, and persecution that affected New Christians and Moriscos; Adriano Prospero (1996), who has analysed the Roman Inquisition within other mechanisms of social discipline, particularly the confession and internal missions, and who has also organised, with Vincenzo Lavenia and John Tedeschi, the *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione* (2010); and Massimo Firpo (1992 and 2014), who has produced a thesis about the role of the Roman Inquisition as an instrument of factional fighting within the papal court, an argument that had inspired my own research.

What is my own assessment of the book? First, it enabled me to get comfortable working with archives in different languages and different countries, work that requires some control of local, regional and national historiographies. This comparative approach shaped my work to the point where I am now unable to consider any object of research within a simple national framework. Certainly, there are specific national features; but they can only be identified in a wider context in which communication, transfer, adaptation and transformation play important roles. Second, my research on the Inquisition required extensive travelling in terms of time and geographic location, and meant that I was confronted with many different historical forms of thinking and doing. Third, the study of this disciplinary mechanism opened my mind to forms of resistance, and the way systems of values changed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The research for this book significantly broadened the scale of my work, since I learned to combine working at the macro and the micro

levels, use different structural approaches, and draw on the daily interactions of groups and individuals. I would have never started the research for my book *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (2013) without this training in new methods and in cross-disciplinary work between history and social sciences. Nowadays I might have engaged more with the impact of the Inquisition in Africa and Asia, included an insight into the practices of negotiation used by the victims, and developed further the last section on the Inquisition's abolition. In the meantime, I have accumulated a significant number of new sources on representations, and so that section could be improved. However, the structure of the book still fulfils its function; there is a clear argument that runs as a thread throughout the book.

The importance of minorities in societies, which I had researched for my first book on witchcraft and sorcery, became even more obvious when I worked on the Inquisition. However, I did not directly address the position of these groups; I was more interested in the way they were persecuted as a means of asserting power. This focus on institutional power continued to guide me in my next cycle of research, which concerned the Portuguese expansion, and which I situated right from the start within the context of the European expansion, offering a comparative perspective. However, I saw the limits of the institutional and organisational approach. When the Presses Universitaires de France invited me to write a book on European expansion, around the year 2000, I declined. This was the crucial moment at which I decided I needed to look at that historical process from below, reversing my previous perspective. The book on *Racisms* was a consequence of that decision. I dealt with the economic and social aspects of the division of labour, with how the classification of human variety was transformed into theories of race, the organisation of hierarchies and the monopolisation of resources. My readings widened to include the reflections of those transformed into minorities and placed on the lowest level of the division of labour, since these people had a voice and were able to express with extraordinary clarity their feelings and emotions. My practice of history had hitherto addressed religious, social and political problems that reflected unequal conditions; but *Racisms* stimulated me to go deeper and engage with the voice of the oppressed.

When I completed *Racisms*, I decided to work on the history of inequality in the world. I felt this was a logical development of my research trajectory. However, I could not find support for the project. The funding agencies were right: when I look at the project now, I can see that it required more work. At this point, the sources I had drawn on for my research on the Inquisition came to my rescue. I realised that research into the history of

New Christians of Jewish origin could respond to my wish to enquire into a disadvantaged group's economic, social, intellectual and political impact and would also satisfy a renewed interest I felt in merchant culture in relation to inequality. I had avoided working on the New Christians immediately after the book on the Inquisition, although this could have been a natural next topic. I thought about it; but I wanted to radically change my field of work. I also felt intuitively that it was not the right time; that such a study required new tools and an engagement with economic history. However, after the book on *Racisms*, I felt that I had the theoretical background to address the issue in a consistent way. It was easy to organise a project, since I was very familiar with the relevant archival sources in different countries. The Leverhulme Trust supported the project; and I was lucky enough to develop my research between 2017 and 2019, just before the Covid pandemic. It is not the moment to talk about this recent research, except to say that the resulting monograph will be published by Princeton University Press in 2023. What I have tried to do here is to convey how my work on the Inquisition is still stimulating my research in unintended ways after all these years.

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A INQUISIÇÃO NO MUNDO NA ÉPOCA MODERNA: TRINTA ANOS DE DIÁLOGO

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Este ensaio analisa o contexto de escrita do meu estudo comparativo da Inquisição no sul da Europa e noutros continentes, do século XV ao século XIX, com base em fontes primárias. As principais questões, métodos e argumentos são discutidos aqui, bem como a difusão em diferentes línguas e a recepção em vários países. O objetivo é refletir sobre a historiografia, entendida como um empreendimento coletivo movido por esforços individuais sempre verificados e questionados, mas também sobre o impacto público. Concentro-me no intercâmbio permanente como base do conhecimento, mas também nas mudanças de tempo e de lugar que criam novas necessidades de pesquisa histórica e novos paradigmas.

Palavras-chave: Inquisição, heresia, representações, sistema de valores, análise macro-micro, história comparada.



L'INQUISITION DANS LE MONDE À L'ÉPOQUE MODERNE: TRENTÉ ANS EN DIALOGUE

Cet essai analyse le contexte de la rédaction de mon étude comparative de l'Inquisition en Europe du Sud et sur d'autres continents du XV^e au XIX^e siècle à partir de sources primaires. Les principales questions, méthodes et arguments sont abordés ici, ainsi que la diffusion dans différentes langues et la réception dans plusieurs pays. Il s'agit de réfléchir sur l'historiographie, vue comme une entreprise collective mue par des efforts individuels toujours contrôlés et contestés, mais aussi sur l'impact public. Je mettrai l'accent sur l'échange permanent comme base de connaissance, mais aussi sur les changements de temps et de lieu qui créent de nouveaux besoins de recherche historique et de nouveaux paradigmes.

Mots-clés: Inquisition, hérésie, représentations, systèmes de valeurs, analyse macro-micro, histoire comparée.