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the 16th–17th Centuries

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# Jews and New Christians in the Making of the Atlantic World in the 16th–17th Centuries

*A Survey*

*By*

Henryk Szlajfer



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*For Professor Tadeusz M. Orłowski, MD, and Janek Ordynski  
always present in times of need,  
and for Marysia and Helenka as ever*





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## Preface

In less than thirty years after Columbus' first expedition, Cuba and Hispaniola, the main islands of the Caribbean, had already been inhabited almost exclusively by Spanish conquistadors, their first descendants and incoming settlers from Spain. Even before the conquest of Mexico, the Caribbean Taíno Indians would be ravaged by disease and the labour regime imposed by the conquerors. By the mid-16th century, of the estimated population of just over 50 million Indians of pre-Columbian Latin America<sup>1</sup> no more than 2.5–15 per cent had survived, depending on the region. Two and a half centuries later, colonial Mexico, Brazil and Peru were home to 2.26 million descendants of the European conquistadors and the metropolitan influx of Spaniards and Portuguese (21.5 per cent of the total population) (Newson 2006: 148, 160).<sup>2</sup> With control of the major economic resources and the monopoly of violence secured by local militias and metropolises, this white minority formed the elite of the new societies.

A small part of it consisted of Jews, or more precisely, conversos and New Christians (Catholics whose Jewish ancestors had been baptised voluntarily or under compulsion in Spain and Portugal), and Jews migrating from Amsterdam and other cities of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces (hereafter: the Republic or the United Provinces). Estimates, however, are subject to a considerable margin of error and are probably greatly exaggerated. They suggested that among the more than 2 million Europeans who migrated to the Americas between 1500 and 1760, there were no more than 50–70,000 New Christians and 20,000 Jews, translating into an average annual gross migration of between 270–340 people.<sup>3</sup> Thus, no more than 4.5 per cent of total European migration in the colonial era.

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1 The figure given for the population of pre-Columbian Latin America reflects the relative consensus among scholars reached at the end of the 20th century. It was contested as being almost three times overstated by Maddison (2001: 233–236).

2 According to other estimates, in 1760 the population of European descent in the Spanish colonies and Brazil could be estimated at 3.39 million (including 390,000 in Brazil) (Pétré-Grenouilleau 2009: 47).

3 The estimate of the number of New Christians is based on the (debatable) assumption that their share among Portuguese emigrants to Latin America corresponded to the share of Jews in the Portuguese population at the end of the 15th century, i.e. 10 per cent (Drescher 2001: 459f). The lower threshold of 50,000 New Christians is due to the adoption of a different estimate of the number of Portuguese emigrants to Latin America (net emigration) than that given by Drescher (Eltis 2000: 9). In contrast, Lewin (1987: 185) estimated the number of New Christians at 40,000, including 10,000 in Brazil.

Estimates for the beginning of colonisation in the 16th century are equally uncertain. The number of conversos and New Christians in all of Spanish America at the end of the 16th century was probably around 6,000, including 2,000 in Mexico and several thousand in Brazil in the early 17th century. Other estimates put the number at 5,000–7,000 in Spanish America in the 1630s (Swetschinski 2004: 64, Studnicki-Gizbert 2007: 44).<sup>4</sup> This was not a small number, measured in relation to, for example, the size of the Sephardic diaspora in northern Europe or the total white population in the New World of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Aptly, though with some exaggeration, the historian of Amsterdam Jews points out that by the end of the 16th century there was a huge gap between the number of Portuguese New Christians migrating to northern Europe and Italy and the scale of migration within the area controlled by the Iberian states: “Migrations to Spain and the Portuguese and Spanish colonies are measured in the thousands, those to Atlantic and Mediterranean communities in the hundreds” (Swetschinski 2004: 64). Not quite. If one excludes the migrations to the Ottoman Empire after 1492, when the presence of more than 3,000 Sephardic and Balkan Jewish families (about 15,000 people) was recorded in Thessaloniki in 1519 and 8,070 families (about 40,000 people) in Istanbul in 1535, the increase in the number of Jews living in Italian cities from the late 16th century was impressive. In Venice, the number of Jews increased from 900 people to 2,500 between 1552 and 1600 (Israel 2002a: 57, 76, Foa 2000: 163f). By contrast, Amsterdam was home to no more than 650 Portuguese Sephardim in the first decade of the 17th century.

The influx of New Christians into Spanish America would come after 1580, especially in the first decades of the 17th century. The terrible defeat suffered by the Portuguese in 1578 in the battle against the Muslims at Al-Qasr al-Kabir in Morocco, the death of King Sebastian and the extinction of the Aviz dynasty opened the way for Spanish predominance – the Iberian Union was established with Philip II as monarch of both Spain and Portugal. Its creation opened, with some delay, the Portuguese New Christians’ access to the markets of Spain and the Spanish colonies. It should be borne in mind, after all, that while Portuguese New Christians appeared in Latin America as early as the beginning of the 16th century, the presence of Amsterdam Jews, mostly of Portuguese origin, dates only from the 1630s. However, the importance of both

4 A figure of 2,000–3,000 for New Spain is given by Liebman (1963: 100). This is disputed as “a bit too high” by Baron (1973: 279). Israel (1990a: 317, 319, 330), on the other hand, estimates that in 1641 the Portuguese (without differentiating between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Christians) probably constituted 7 per cent of the white population of New Spain, i.e. 11,000–12,000 people. There were 1,000–1,500 Portuguese living in Ciudad de México in that year.

groups in establishing Latin America and the Atlantic world as an economic area from the 16th century was far greater than the cited estimates would suggest. This was particularly true of the New Christians in the first 150 years of colonisation. Reason enough, it seems, to take an interest.

A consternation, however, arises during the literature review. The role of European Jews and New Christians in shaping the economies of colonial Latin America in the 16th to the 18th centuries is a topic usually ignored even in the best general historical studies of this part of the New World or reduced to a few remarks and/or footnotes (Bakewell 2004, Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, Bethell 1984, Bulmer-Thomas, Coatsworth and Cortés Conde 2006, Elliott 2006, Kamen 2003). Also, in general accounts of Jewish history, the history of the New Christians and Jews in colonial Latin America is treated as a secondary issue (Avni 1992). The underlying theme is the tumultuous changes that, over the course of three centuries, shaped essentially new Jewish communities in Europe, while also shifting the focus of Jewish life towards Central and Eastern Europe.

This is not surprising. The history of the New World as seen by historians tends, in this case, to be at odds with the widespread belief in the overwhelming role of the Jews in the creation of the colonial world. In the perspective of Latin America as a whole, as well as of individual countries, the actions of much more powerful agents other than the Jews stand out. And yet the reflection arises that this is not the only reason. It seems that the complexity of the topic, the fluid boundaries between the convictions, including those of historians, amassed knowledge, and above all the difficulties involved in researching the role of minorities in social processes, tend to result in defensive reactions. These in turn are also expressed in the relegation of the problem to the background, in the minimalisation of its significance. Years ago, R. H. Popkin, an historian of Enlightenment philosophical thought and of Sephardi Jews' attempts at coming to grips with the reconstruction of their religious and social identity destroyed in the 15th–16th century persecutions, observed that “the Jews had been the invisible man of Western history for the last 2,000 years” (quoted in Liebman 1975: 141). He was not the first to admonish the proper place for ethnic and religious minorities. Let us just recall Adam Smith's remark that it was, “the disorder and injustice of the European governments” that in fact contributed to “the peopling and civilisation of America”. The result was a long list of exiles making up the New World: “The English puritans, restrained at home (...). The English catholics, treated with much greater injustice (...); the quakers (...). The Portuguese Jews, persecuted by the inquisition, stripped of their fortunes, and banished to Brazil” (Smith 1904: 190f).

Of course, the treatment of this subject is different in monographs dealing with the past of the various parts of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, as well as the English, French and Dutch colonies. Here, references are more frequent, especially in areas where this role can be described and where the New Christians and Jews exerted a significant and/or interesting influence. One can even speak of a kind of publishing boom in recent decades. We also have monographs and collective works devoted exclusively or largely to Jewish and New Christian merchants, financiers, trade intermediaries and planters in the Atlantic economy that took shape from the late 15th century.<sup>5</sup>

In this book we will focus on analysis of the role the New Christians and Jews played in the formation of the colonial economy of Latin America in the first two centuries after the conquest and this way also contributed to the emergence of the Atlantic world. This survey is intended as a kind of commentary on selected issues taken up in the literature on the subject. Polish historians have not addressed these issues, apart from a few references.<sup>6</sup> I mention

5 By way of example only, as the literature is already vast. A general historical overview, taking into account the literature up to the mid-1960s, can be found in Salo W. Baron's *magnum opus*, as well as in the works of the next generation of historians, notably Jonathan I. Israel and Jonathan Schorsch. The activities of Dutch Jews have been addressed by Yosef Kaplan, Daniel M. Swetschinski and Miriam Bodian, among others. Of importance for the understanding the converso phenomenon are contributions of Benzion Netanyahu, Norman Roth, David S. Gitlitz and Claude B. Stuczynski (from the younger generation). In the study of the Jewish presence in colonial Latin America, the earlier works of Seymour B. Liebman, Boleslaw Lewin from Argentina and Günter Böhm from Chile, as well as excerpts from books by the Spanish historians J. Caro Baroja and A. Domínguez Ortiz, are noteworthy. The problem of *judaizantes* in Spanish America and Brazil up to the end of the 17th century has recently been taken up in monographs by Bruno Feitler, Ronaldo Vainfas and Ricardo Escobar Quevedo. Arnold Wiznitzer's book on the Jewish presence in Brazil is still worth reading. Among the classic works on Brazilian New Christians, one should mention contributions by José Antônio Gonsalves de Mello, Anita Waingort Novinsky, and José Gonçalves Salvador (including a controversial book on the participation of New Christians in the slave trade until the mid-17th century). Of note are contributions from Brazilian scholars of the younger generation concerning various aspects of the presence of New Christians both in Brazil and in the Spanish colonies, especially in Rio de la Plata. From more recent contributions, the Jewish presence in Nieuw-Holland, as well as Suriname and the Caribbean, are dealt with by, among others, numerous articles by Wim Klooster, monographs by Robert Cohen, Wieke Vink and Aviva Ben-Ur. Among the collective works published in recent years, see above all the volumes edited by P. Bernardini and N. Fiering and R. L. Kagan and P.D. Morgan, as well as the monographic issues of, for example, *Anais de História de Além-Mar* (dedicated to the theme *Os Judeus e o comércio colonial*), *Journal of Global Slavery* (on various aspects of the Iberian slave trade) and *Jewish History* (special issue on Portuguese New Christian identities, 1516–1700).

6 Research on Gaspar da Gama, a native of Poznań, an important figure who appeared at the beginning of Portuguese colonisation, is modest. The co-founder of Polish historiography

it because this book, first addressed to the Polish reader, was intended as an introduction to a subject far removed from the interests of Polish historiography. With some editorial changes and abbreviations, the book still retains this character. However, it should be emphasised at this point that the birth of the modern European economy in the 16th and 17th centuries, as seen from the perspective of Eastern Europe, has by no means escaped the attention of Polish economic historians. Quite the contrary. Researchers associated with the seminars of Marian Małowist and Witold Kula at the University of Warsaw in the 1960s and 1970s contributed innovative analyses of economic relations between Western and Eastern Europe (Kochanowicz 2006, Sosnowska 2019). In the mid-1960s, the following statement definitely did not belong to the mainstream European historiography: "The first countries of the developing capitalism were setting up sugar or cotton plantations for themselves across the Ocean, and found grain 'plantations' for themselves in Eastern Europe" (Kula 1983: 165). It would take the support of Fernand Braudel, Michael Moïsseï Postan, Immanuel Wallerstein and others to appreciate these Eastern European precursors. And at the same time, Polish historians would not pay attention to the role played by Sephardim and conversos if only in the development of Baltic grain and timber trade. They saw the Dutch partners and ships, not the Jewish merchants. This is not the place to dwell on this issue in greater detail. Suffice it to say that for Poland and Eastern Europe, the Jewish diaspora is tantamount to the Ashkenazi, not the Sephardi Jews' presence. The activities and economic interests of those who spoke the "language of Ashkenaz" were only indirectly linked to the development of the Atlantic world. They would appear in limited numbers in the Caribbean and Suriname only in the second half of the 18th century. A rapidly growing community, they would be present at and play a role in the consolidation of the Polish semi-periphery, while the numerically smaller group of Sephardim, former New Christians, would participate in the rise of Dutch core capitalism. There were no Ashkenazi Jews among the internationalised great Jewish merchants of the 16th–17th centuries.

However, it is worth starting with a brief declaration of what will not be discussed in this book. In addressing the role of the New Christians and Jews

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Lelewel (1858: 412f, 168, 581) wrote of him in the 19th century: "Poles travelled always and endlessly, and many out of desire or necessity in the far corners of the world (...). Without a Jew from Poznań, who travelled around India and was baptised Gaspard da Gama, Vasko (sic) de Gama 1498 and Cabral 1500, they would not have had the success in their expeditions that he gained. Amerigo Vespucci 1500 wrote down Gaspard's stories". Only one historian of geography and cartography wrote more extensively on this Poznań Jew almost a century ago (Olszewicz 1931: 187f, 203).

in shaping the colonial economy, this work does not look into the debate, ongoing for a century, about Columbus's lineage: was he or was he not a descendant of Spanish conversos who settled in Genoa. He was not, although until a few years ago it was argued, not very convincingly and indeed echoing the hypothesis put forward almost a century ago by British historian of the marranos, that Columbus left many traces in his manuscripts, suggesting his supposed Jewish ancestry (Roth 1959). Thus, references to the Old Testament in his letters, a signature suggesting a Jewish prayer for the dead, etc. have been pointed out. One could just as well construct elaborate theories by quoting the coincidence mentioned by the explorer in his journal of the first expedition: "after having turned out all the Jews from all your kingdoms and lordships, in the same month of January [1492], your Highnesses gave orders to me that with a sufficient fleet I should go to the said parts of India" (Columbus 1893: 17f). This was treated as an open question by Dominguez Ortiz (1971: 128f).<sup>7</sup> Nor do we have in mind the fact that the funding for Columbus's expedition came largely from conversos, merchants and financiers of Aragon, also royal officials,<sup>8</sup> and that one of the first to set foot on the soil of the new continent was Luis de Torres, a newly baptised Jew. On the number of conversos among the 87 members of Columbus's first expedition, there is still a rather sterile dispute. This includes speculation about the possible influence that the Jewish roots of the great-grandparents of the *encomendero*, then Dominican and most famous defender of the Indians, Bartolomé de Las Casas, had on his assessments of the conquistadors' activities. The same goes for the relationship between the genealogy and the work of the author of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* or the intellectual contributions of 16th-century Spanish theologians, philosophers, religious reformers and counter-reformers with Jewish roots, such as Saints Teresa and Juan of Avila or Francisco de Vitória of the University of Salamanca (Clayton 2012: 12f, Orique 2014: 97, Dominguez Ortiz 1971: Chapters 8–9). Nor,

7 Even Werner Sombart, the well-known German historian of the turn of the 20th century, who asserted that when looking at the portraits of the directors of the Dutch East India Company he could easily recognise Jews, distanced himself from this concept. But ... having signalled his doubts, he nevertheless resorted to his favourite piece of evidence: "the oldest portraits show [Columbus] to have had a Jewish face" (Sombart 1951: 52).

8 In particular, the loan provided by Luís de Santángel, Chief Intendant of the Catholic King and Queen, "of the Rothschild family of that time" (Kayserling 1894: 64). These "Rothschilds" had already been Christianised for several generations. Santángel obtained the funds to finance almost 60 per cent of the cost of the expedition as a loan from an institution founded on traditional armed *hermandades* (Ladero Quesada 1992). Columbus's second expedition – at least 1,200 sailors and settlers – was financed by the Crown in large part with funds seized from Jews expelled in 1492.



finally, do we have in mind the achievements of Muslim and then Portuguese and Jewish oceanographers and astronomers (most notably Abraham Zacuto of the University of Salamanca, then an outcast in Portugal, or his pupil Josef Vecinho), thanks to whom there was a breakthrough in the understanding of space and the creation of maps and instruments to enable oceanic expeditions (marking positions and identifying currents). These are interesting, but on the whole incidental, facts. The exception, bearing in mind the topic at hand, is probably the information that the first Spanish merchant to obtain Queen Isabella's permission in 1502 to trade with the New World tax-free for the Crown was converso Juan Sanchez, grandson of a former royal treasurer. His five caravels delivered grain, honey, horses and other goods to Hispaniola, devastated by the actions of Spanish settlers. This privilege was renewed in 1504 (Seed 2001: 127). So, many caveats.

Here are the issues we intend to address (with varying degrees of detail) in this book: *Jews and New Christians*. We question the overuse of the term 'the role of the Jews'. It blurs the growing differences in that era between the community, culture and economic priorities of Sephardic Jews in the Netherlands (from the second half of the 17th century also English Jews) and the activities of Iberian and Latin American New Christians and the ways in which they participated in wider society. There is no doubt that the activities of all these groups overlapped even in the second half of the 17th century within a network of family and commercial ties. It does, however, raise the question as to whether it is legitimate to treat the New Christians *in toto* as part of a structurally and functionally tight-knit Jewish diaspora whose glue was religion (or a memory of it). It does not seem accurate to diminish the consequences associated with the destruction of Iberian institutional Judaism, in particular the breakdown of the religious community and the blurring of the criteria for the formation of non-Catholic identities. It seems almost impossible to formulate general statements about the religious preferences of converts subjected to the authority of Catholic monarchs. The result of the persecution that went hand in hand with the accentuation of increasingly racialised criteria, which accompanied the economic advancement of part of the New Christian elite, "was to revive New Christians' consciousness, not of their alleged Jewishness, but of a community of interests distinct from those of Old Christians" (Boyajian 1979: 142, also Bodian 1999: 10–17). By contrast, it was a misunderstanding to describe the Lisbon New Christian merchant-bankers, who financed part of the Spanish monarchy's debt in 1627, as "Portuguese Jewish and *converso* (...) financiers" (Munck 1990: 55). We therefore suggest treating the New Christians as a group *sui generis*.

At the same time, we see that the process of differentiation, accelerated by both expulsion and forced baptism, expressed in the phenomenon of the New Christians, was gradual, just as the departure of the New Christians from Judaism was gradual and spread over generations. The separation from and the rupture with Jewish cultural tradition took even longer. This process was accelerated from above at the end of the 16th century by the targeted repression of the New Christians by the Inquisition (especially in Brazil and Portugal, though not bypassing the Spanish colonies). In Spain, the main impact of the newly established Inquisition targeting conversos would come earlier and last from the 1480s to the 1520s–30s. The formation of differing, even opposing, political loyalties, grounded in the increasing differentiation of economic interests between Jews and New Christians, was also an important part of these processes. This was closely linked to the process of nation-state formation initiated in the mercantilist era. ‘Cosmopolitanism’, which characterised the condition of European merchants participating in the overseas commerce of the early modern era, was increasingly constrained in the process of establishing modern states.

This is one issue. There is another, closely linked to it. The New Christians who were active in the Atlantic world were referred to, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, as ‘Portuguese’. Outside observers, however, often included in the Portuguese *La Nação* not only Jewish Amsterdam merchants, crypto-Jews and New Christians who originated from Portugal, but also Portuguese Old Christians. Should this external view be considered a conclusive criterion? Can other, stronger arguments be adduced for the hypothesis that the Portuguese Nation of the 16th and 17th centuries was diverse, but at the same time represented a community shaped by long-distance trade, despite religious differences? If so, this reinforces the hypothesis that the New Christians constituted a group *sui generis* increasingly integrated within the larger context of *La Nação* networks. At the same time, these *cristãos-novos* were influencing, by their very presence, the evolution of the attitudes and mentality of the Old Christians participating in the Atlantic economy. This interesting issue has recently been raised by Studnicki-Gizbert (2007, 2009) in relation to the years 1492–1640. However, the links between the New Christians and Amsterdam Jews, who were just emerging at the threshold of the 16th century, are more often than not marginalized when discussing the emergence of the Atlantic world. They are a neglected element in the picture painted by the historian: “The Atlantic Jews age was a time when the American Jewish epicenter was (...) in the insular and circum-Caribbean; when for centuries most Atlantic Jews were of Iberian (...) origins; when most hemispheric American Jews lived in slave societies” (Ben-Ur 2020: 12f). Thus, we intend to



recall that before these Jews would appear in the Atlantic world, it was the New Christians who in the 16th century were already busy co-creating the New World – with the Caribbean playing a secondary role. And not all of them lived in slave societies, although many participated in the slave trade.

*The main directions and forms of Jewish and New Christian activity.* Neither the Dutch Jews nor the Portuguese or Spanish New Christians were independent actors in the emerging Atlantic economy, even when they went beyond the established rules of the game (by participating, for example, in large-scale contraband). Above all, they were not the creators of these rules and their guardians. To describe their participation in the development of the Latin American economies of the colonial era as a decisive part of the continent's economic history would simply contradict the source material. Even in the period up to 1650, the period of the apogee of the involvement of New Christians and Jews in international trade: "The fact that Jewish merchants were to be found in all the key centres of capitalism does not mean to say that they created them" (Braudel 1995: 160).

By contrast, in the 16th and much of the 17th century, the New Christians and Jews constituted, together with the Dutch, the Flemish, the merchants of the Italian city-states and the English, the vanguard of European commercial capitalism. In turn, such capitalism "could be a creative force, bringing into existence a *system* of production for exchange" (Sweezy 1978: 42). The New Christians and Jews thus not only participated in ushering in the Golden Age of the Netherlands, but they co-created important elements of the Latin American economies and, more broadly, the Atlantic world. The initiation of the slave trade on a wider scale during this period was a venture organised and controlled until the first half of the 17th century primarily by Portuguese New Christians. In contrast, neither the New Christians nor the Dutch or English Jews would play a major role in the boom in the slave trade from the second half of the 17th century to the end of the 18th century.

At the same time, the family and trade networks they created, important in certain markets and for certain commodities, were not closed or monopolistic, in the sense of excluding Catholic and Protestant merchants. The increasing scale and complexity and diversity of commercial operations in the Atlantic economy of the time meant that achieving such a monopoly in the long term was impossible. This was evidenced, among other things, by the emergence of loose ties involving Jewish, crypto-Jewish, New Christian and Old Christian merchants, non-Jewish trade agents and intermediaries. Indeed, a model example of such ties was the late 16th century collaboration in the marketing of Indian pepper between the powerful New Christian Ximenes d'Aragão

family and the influential Milanese merchant Giovanni Battista Rovellasca (Rovelesca).

Jews and New Christians, on the other hand, were unique in some respects among the minorities participating in international trade. Alongside them in this period we find not only the Huguenots and other Protestants, but also Flemings, Basques, Bretons, Scots, Armenians, Greeks, etc. merchant communities probably rivalling the 'Portuguese' group in numbers. What distinguished the latter was not so much the scale of their operations as their degree of internationalisation and their location in the main European and overseas trade centres. One could say that it was the medieval tradition of Jewish Radhanite merchants travelling with goods from the 'court of the King of the Franks' to India and China that was transferred to the new conditions created from the late 15th century. Scattered across the Atlantic world, the Mediterranean, West Africa and Asia, Jews and New Christians operated with the help of their commercial agents and associates (including Old Christians) throughout the world economy of the time. North America was the least penetrated by the 18th century.

*The particular importance of the 16th to 17th centuries.* As in the Atlantic economy as a whole, in Latin America too, the apogee of the long-distance trade-centred activity of the New Christians and Jews occurred up to the second half of the 17th century, thus the era of the first system of expansion created and dominated by Spain and Portugal. The Netherlands, contesting the dominance of the Iberian powers from the end of the 16th century, found itself in a kind of transitional situation: the first system of expansion had already lost its momentum, while the second – shaped in fierce competition between England, the Spanish empire and the United Provinces – was only in the initial stages of development (Emmer 1993). The 17th century is divided from this point of view into two parts, the era of the transition from "Seville to Amsterdam" (Wallerstein 1974: 199–201) and then from Amsterdam to London. The logic of the activities and expansion of Dutch companies in Asia and the Atlantic already fitted well into the second system, calling into question the methods of organising long-distance trade prevalent in the first system, and also paving the way for the new hegemon, England. The activities of the New Christians and Jews also flourished during this transitional period. The peak of their activity in the Atlantic thus occurred in the first half of the 17th century.

The case of Brazil was to some extent separate. For here the economic activity of the New Christians was evident from at least the middle of the 16th century, not only in long-distance trade, but also in new settlements and the plantation economy and therefore in the production of luxury goods. From the late 17th century, there were also many New Christians

participating in the great economic boom associated with the discovery of gold and diamonds in Minas Gerais. In turn, in the 18th century, the experience of the Amsterdam Jews from 1630–1654 in Pernambuco, from the time of ‘Dutch Brazil’ conquered and controlled by the West India Company (WIC – *Geoctroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie*), would be repeated (with modifications) in Dutch Suriname.

The gradual decline of the role of the New Christians and Sephardic Jews in Latin America and the Atlantic trade was caused by two fundamental factors: (a) the emergence of powers more powerful than the Iberian empires and the Netherlands (England and France) and their growing and differently organised economic elites; this meant the entry as early as the end of the 17th century of a rapidly expanding second system of expansion, which was at the same time a response to the extremely rapid growth of overseas trade, a phenomenon the commercial and financial elites of the New Christians and Sephardic Jews were unable to respond to effectively; (b) the increased activity of the Inquisition in Spanish America and Brazil from the late 16th century and intensified from the mid-17th and early 18th centuries, but also in the Iberian metropolises, symbolised by the successively revealed ‘great conspiracies’ of Judaising heretics in Ciudad de México, Lima and Cartagena de Indias (hereafter also: Cartagena). To some extent separate from these was the failure, after less than a quarter of a century of existence, of ‘Dutch Brazil’ (1630–1654), and thus the attempt to move from maritime commercial activities to Dutch and Jewish settlement and trade. The plantation economy in Suriname was merely an extension in the 18th century – and in the long run also unsuccessful – of the earlier Pernambuco experiment.

The balance sheet of the conquest of Latin America and implicitly of the economic role played by Jews and New Christians in the New World was for Adam Smith (1904: 236) ambivalent: “To the natives (...) both of the East and West Indies, all the commercial benefits which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned”. At the same time, he added justifiably: “These misfortunes, however, seem to have arisen rather from accident than from any thing in the nature of those events themselves”. A similar tone would appear in the recent deliberations of historians: “A clear-cut tally sheet of the costs and benefits involved [in European expansion] cannot be drawn up. New crops (...) improved the life of many societies, whereas new pests tormented them” (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005: 45). Does this also concern the mass slavery of Africans? Its origin must be traced to the interaction between European demand for luxury goods and changes in consumption styles and behaviour of settlers-as-economic-agents in the New World. It is debatable whether the

transfer from the New World of cassava and maize – crops crucial for sustaining Africa's food supply – balanced the trade in the millions of slaves (Thomas 1998: 133). With some irony, therefore, the German historian wrote at the dawn of the 20th century:

Around 1830 the total number of slaves in all slave-trading countries amounted to 6,822,759. That the pretty little damsels of Paris and London were able to mobilize this vast black army to satisfy their whims is an intriguing thought.

SOMBART 1967: 145

The two accounts of losses and gains – the one on a macro scale and the one limited to Jews and New Christians – are closely linked, and the attempt to separate them leads, whatever the intention, down a blind alley. Those, therefore, who regard the emergence of Europe in the New World, from a humanitarian or any other point of view, as a calamity and a destruction difficult to imagine, also regard the activity of Jews and New Christians as part of this catastrophe. The opposite is true for those who, without minimising the scale of the destruction and the enormity of the misfortune caused by the appearance of Europeans, will make the reference point the process of the formation of a new, multicultural Latin America and therefore, to emphasise after Smith, “the nature of those events themselves”.

It is impossible to reconcile these two points of view, although they are nowadays only symbolic. Instead, it seems sensible to try to understand the interweaving of motivations, conditioning worldviews and circumstances. Only in this way is it possible to come closer to answering the question of why Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, descended from the New Christians, governor of Nuevo Reino de León in New Spain in the 1680s and subsequently accused (unjustifiably) of protecting the *judaizantes*, can be described simultaneously as a beneficiary of slavery and as “one of the more enlightened and humane conquistadors” (Temkin 2011, Simpson 1971: 193). Whether he benefited from the slave trade as a royal official in the Cape Verde islands, we do not know. As a later governor, he obtained permission to buy them. On the other hand, the doubts raised do not evade questions about the different styles of colonisation and the creation of Latin America as a strongly differentiated entity. The French and British Caribbean differed, even though both are today subsumed under the general categories of colonial plantation economies and slave societies. The same can be said of the role played by the New Christians in Brazil or the Jews in the British and Dutch Caribbean. As Jews and New Christians, the descendants of the Sephardim were part of the European expansion. Contrary

to traditional Jewish historiography, they did not so much passively adapt to their new environment as participate in the creation of new societies, including in the New World, despite persecution. It was often a tragic story, but certainly not one of constant repression and misfortune. A young Jewish historian wrote in his programme article in 1928 that, "it is time to break with the lachrymose theory of pre-Revolutionary woe, and to adopt a view more in accord with historic truth" (Baron 1928: 12).

The history of the New Christians in colonial Latin America was intertwined with the presence of the Iberian Inquisition, and their activity was constantly accompanied by the threat of the tribunal. Likewise, moreover, in the metropolises. It is therefore not surprising that, in Portugal, the dispute over the assessment of the role played by the New Christians and the Inquisition has become an enduring part of historical reflection. Depending on the researcher, responsibility for Portugal's fate, its successes and disasters, was attributed differently. João Lúcio de Azevedo, a prominent Portuguese historian of the early 20th century, would see the New Christians as the main source of misfortune. In contrast, the co-founder of Brazilian historiography João Capistrano de Abreu, states: "I see the misfortunes of Portugal – not in the New Christians – *vae victis* – but in the angelic Holy Office" (quoted in Schwartz 1997: xxviii).<sup>9</sup>

But the point is not only in the tragic intertwining of the history of the New Christians and the Inquisition in the metropolis and colonies and their understandable quest for survival. Jews and New Christians also sought in the New World to preserve their position in the European white elite. These efforts were not fruitless. So we see them as merchants, including slave traders, and co-organisers of contraband, as craftsmen, medics and apothecaries, jewellers and ship carpenters, *senhores de engenho*, we find them among the Brazilian *bandeirantes* who were the terror of the Guarani Indians and the Spanish Jesuits, among those who fought the Indians and held office in Suriname, but also among Caribbean corsairs and pirates, diocesan priests, Inquisition officials and even bishops (one in Latin America, several in the metropolis). They "Judaised" Indians and slaves at times (while perpetuating caste and racial prejudices), and they also filled the secret prisons of the Inquisition. They were burned at the stake.<sup>10</sup> To the amazement of the nobility and mob attending

9 Let us note already at this point that the Spanish Inquisition, although established to expose the *judaizantes*, was not confined to fighting them. From the middle of the 16th century, the problem recedes into the background in the metropolis. In the New World, it will appear in the first half of the 17th century, although even here the Inquisition will be mostly preoccupied with other offences against faith and morality (Hordes 1982b).

10 According to Eltis (2000: 71), 32,000 *judaizantes* were burnt at the stake from the late 15th to the early 19th century. This is a mistake. This figure includes all those sentenced

the execution, some met their fate with a confession praising the Inquisition-condemned “dead Law of Moses”, as was the case with Isaac de Castro Tartas, a French-born young Jew from ‘Dutch Brazil’. Captured in Bahia, the Inquisitors in Lisbon decided to treat him as “a baptized Christian”, i.e. heretic (Bodian 2008: 141). He was burned at the stake in 1647. For Azevedo (1922), however, this wretch was an “exalted fanatic”, not a Jewish victim.

In all of these roles, the New Christians and Jews were part of the emerging Latin America, its unique, multi-ethnic history and culture. However, let us emphasise the word ‘were’. The combination of more than two centuries of repression against the New Christians and the assimilation of a sizeable part of them brought the history of this group to an end in the 18th century. The repression in the first half of this century was merely the last act of the drama. In Portugal, this involved some 2,300 New Christians between 1707 and 1750 (more than 60 per cent of the total condemned by the Inquisition during this period). Even more violent, concentrated between 1720 and 1727, was the repression in Spain – *la última gran persecución*. More than 1,000 *judai-zantes*, mostly Portuguese from Seville and Madrid, were convicted during this period. Many were burned. On the other hand, the decisions of the Portuguese reformer Marquis de Pombal in 1768 and 1773–74 to destroy the documents identifying the New Christians (royal *Carta de Lei de 25 de Maio de 1773*) and to abolish the requirement to present a certificate of ‘purity of blood’ (Novinsky 1987: 147, Israel 2002a: 575, 577, Pulido Serrano 2003: 72, Martins 2008),<sup>11</sup> were formal moves confirming, in fact, the degree to which the integration of the New Christians had advanced:

When, after an hiatus of some three centuries, authentic Jewish communities sprang up once again on Portuguese soil (...).their membership were all immigrants from Gibraltar and Morocco. Indigenous Portuguese families were conspicuous by their absence.

SARAIVA 2001: 233

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to death by the Spanish Inquisition and handed over to the secular authorities for execution. Among them were some 17,000 *relaxados en estátua*, i.e. executed symbolically (*in effigie* – in place of the absentee convict, his or her portrait was burned). According to more recent calculations, between 1480 and 1534, i.e. at the apogee of the repression, the Spanish Inquisition sent 2,000 victims to the stake (Kamen 2005: 65).

- 11 While the political demise of the Marquis de Pombal after the king's death in 1777 enabled the release from prison of many of his opponents, including the arrested Jesuits, it did not result in a reversal of decisions concerning the New Christians.

In Spanish America, the fundamental weakening of the New Christians by the tribunals of the Holy Office can be traced back to the 1630s. In Brazil, on the other hand, after the persecutions of the late 16th century in Bahia and Pernambuco, repression would resume in the early 18th century, mainly in Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and Paraiba, on a scale at least equal to that demonstrated during the investigations and trials in Lima, Ciudad de México and Cartagena de Indias in the first half of the 17th century. In these three capitals, 405 New Christians were imprisoned, while the total number denounced reached 1,650. Care for the purity of the faith was also accompanied in each of these periods by confiscations. In Rio de Janeiro alone, the property confiscated between 1711 and 1720 from a group of 129 of the wealthiest *judaizantes* was estimated to be the equivalent of five tonnes of gold (Novinsky 1998: 303, 306). In contrast, the fate of the Jews in Suriname and the English Caribbean was determined primarily by economic factors. In the case of the French colonies, one can speak of the important role played in limiting their presence by the restrictions imposed by Louis XIV in, among other things, the first article of the *Code Noir* promulgated in 1685. Underlying these were both arguments derived from Catholic doctrine (Jews would be expelled from the islands as “declared enemies of Christianity”) and the demands of Christian competitors.

The memory of the New Christians and Sephardic Jews in colonial Latin America was therefore already historical. There is no question of a continuity linking their history with the later, growing presence of Eastern European and Oriental Jews emigrating from the Mediterranean area after the turn of the 20th century. Marked by the activity of the great Jewish and New Christian merchants, the period up to the mid-17th century was a mere century-long flash.

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