

Henryk Szlajfer, *Nowi chrześcijanie i Żydzi w gospodarce kolonialnej Ameryki Łacińskiej, XVI–XVII w. Zarys problematyki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2018, pp. 427

Henryk Szlajfer is mostly known as an author of books focusing on economic problems, but he does not shun from essay writing engaged in *ad hoc* public debates. Let us the major ones in the former group: *Nineteenth Century Latin America. Two Models of Capitalism: the Case of Haiti and Paraguay* (1984); *Modernizacja zależności. Kapitalizm i rozwój w Ameryce Łacińskiej* (1985); *Droga na skróty. Nacjonalizm gospodarczy w Ameryce Południowej i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w epoce pierwszej globalizacji: kategorie, analiza, kontekst porównawczy* (2005), the English translation was published in 2012 as *Economic Nationalism and Globalisation. Lessons from Latin America and Central Europe*. The latter category should include a collection of drafts from 2003, *Polacy, Żydzi – zderzenie stereotypu. Esej dla przyjaciół i innych*. One should also mention the English translation of the most accurate texts by Marian Małowist prepared in cooperation with Jean Batou, *Western Europe, Eastern Europe and World Development, 13th–18th Centuries*, published in 2010 by the prestigious Brill publishing company. It can be said that by means of this publication Szlajfer not only paid tribute to his master, one of the most eminent Polish historians of the 20th century, but also by means of his own studies he continues the traditions of the school of Małowist, referred to by Immanuel Wallerstein in his world-systems theory.

It can be said that each of the above-mentioned publications constituted preparation to a kind of summary of the previous studies of Professor Szlajfer, that is the monographic depiction of the issues, which are poorly recognised in the Polish science. By this I mean the issues concerning the presence of Jews in the expansion of Europe in the direction of Latin America at the threshold of the modern era. Its title, *Nowi chrześcijanie i Żydzi w gospodarce kolonialnej Ameryki Łacińskiej, XVI–XVII w. Zarys problematyki*, does well to describe the rather complex history, which is way too often presented in a simplified manner. In a sense, it is therefore

a combination of, on one hand, the subjects present in the essay on the stereotypes lingering in the description of Polish-Jewish relations, on the other hand, of the analysis of economic mechanisms, which conditioned the economic development of both the Western Europe (particularly Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands) and the more and more effectively colonised Latin America. Moreover, economic issues are precisely what often generates the stereotypes concerning the role played by particular participants of economic processes that prove difficult to uproot. It seems that it is hard to find a more effective tool to overcome and deconstruct the long-lingering stereotypes than hard historical data. This is exactly the way chosen by H. Szlajfer, referring to the little-known facts from the past. Equally significant, and fortunately well-preserved, are the archives of the state and church institutions remaining at the service of the dominant Catholic culture, in particular the Inquisition trials. They have already been thoroughly studied and analysed, but the results of these studies remain accessible only to specialists, it is therefore a good thing that the discussed book makes use of them rather often. Particular interpretations are subjected to in-depth analysis, clashing them with hard economic data, which results in some of the overtly bold estimates being verified and made real.

Szlajfer remained truthful to his economic interests, but he enriched them with the analyses of mentality, culture and religion. In other words, he extended the circle of his own interests, following the justified assumptions that it is not only money that conditions human behaviours. A comment made incidentally in *Polacy, Żydzi – zderzenie stereotypu*, that: 'The medieval fear, especially the medieval fight against *conversos* in Spain, Portugal and other countries (an opponent more dangerous, as it was claimed, than an openly declared Jew, which remains an obsession of the anti-Semites until the present day)', was fully exemplified in the discussed book.

It is therefore no wonder that this new book was in a sense created as a result of a surprise. As stated by the author: 'Surprise arises, however, already at the stage of source literature review. The role of the European Jews and new Christians – defined in different manners – in the development of the colonial economies of Latin America from the 16th to 18th centuries is the subject that is usually omitted in the general studies on the history of this part of the New World or reduced to several comments, and perhaps some annotations'. It is therefore no surprise that in the extensive literature on the subject (more than thirty pages of bibliographic items used in the work), a lion's share is constituted by the studies on the position of Jews in the described economic processes.

Besides, these items are practically non-existent in the Polish libraries, to mention a range of works fundamental to their understanding of a British historian, Jonathan I. Israel, primarily concerning the relations between the Netherlands and Latin America, the studies of Argentinian-Israeli researcher, Yosef Kaplan devoted to the changes of religion of Sephardic Jews (forcing them to adopt Christianity, returns to Judaism, etc.), the fundamental findings on the subject of *marranos* of an Israeli historian, Benzion Netanyahu, and, most of all, a Brazilian researcher focusing on the archives of the Inquisition, Anita Novinsky. Equally significant, but little known, are the findings of an American historian, David Brion Davis on the subject of slavery. I only indicate some of the names from a vast, 40-page bibliography, each and every item of which is referred to and exploited critically in the work. It should be emphasised straight away that Szlajfer not only presents the results of these findings, but also verifies them each time and, should the need arise, he indicates the weak spots and lacks in the interpretation of data.

The book presented to the Reader is a response to the simplifications and concealments that are actually tampering with history. It is a fact that this is a subject which not only deserves serious treatment, but most of all it is complementary and in many aspects revises the image of history of the early ages of Latin America. This primarily concerns the Polish Reader, of which Szlajfer is entirely aware when he states: 'however, we primarily consider the fact that in Polish academic literature this subject has not been addressed so far'. The author also instantly pre-empts the unjustified and exaggerated expectations towards the presented depiction of the history of new Christians. For their history was a chapter that was ultimately closed at the beginning of the 18th century. As he states in the conclusion to the introduction: 'The memory about the new Christians and the Sephardic Jews in the colonial Latin America is therefore purely historical. There is no reference to continuation that would connect their history to the later presence of the West-European Jews increasing from the turn of the 19th century, and the Oriental Jews migrating from the area of the Mediterranean Sea'. Naturally, this does not mean that it is thereby less engaging.

All of the material is ordered in eleven chapters, each of which constitutes a small monograph, an integral part of which is formed by extensive annotations, not only noting the intellectual debt repaid by the author to his predecessors, but also an exemplary model of solid academic debate, based on thorough knowledge of their accomplishments. Considering the 'great confusion in the matter', the first chapter puts the names and basic terms in order. It is worth mentioning that the over a thousand-year presence of the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula was suddenly interrupted by the great exile

(expulsion, as the author calls it) from Spain initiated by the Catholic Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand in 1492. Owing to a single administrative move a flourishing and religiously rich community of Spanish Jews was not only destroyed, but also developed different survival strategies of the ones who, mostly forced to do so, converted to Catholicism. Therefore, we are dealing with *conversos* and the new Christians, who mostly accept their new faith, but also with the *marranos* who reject it, as well as the crypto-Jews. Following in the footsteps of Anita Novinsky, the phenomenon of marranism in Brazil can be defined more as a mental attitude than a religious ritual. Interestingly, in Spain itself, as emphasised by Szlajfer, there were many priests and monks originating from among the christened Jews. It can be added that the new Christians not only included many Jesuits, but also a reformer of the Carmelite order, St. Teresa of Ávila. They were fairly early discredited, both in Europe and in the New World, not so much on the grounds of religion, but rather oddly perceived purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*). The influence (or rather the problem) of the 'Portuguese' returning to Judaism in Amsterdam, who became the initiators of rebellion and heresy as a part of rabbinical Judaism is less known. The most famous example is of course that of Baruch Spinoza, but he was not the only one, and the mentions could include Uriel da Costa and Juan de Prado and many others. This is of course constitutes only a fringe of the discussed book, but it is worth noting, as it indicates how unexpected can the consequences of forced religious experiences be sometimes.

A classic example of a long-lingering stereotype is the vision of the role played by the Jews in the development of the modern Netherlands, created at the beginning of the 20th century by a German sociologist, Werner Sombart. Although many do not even mention his name, he had an influence, which is why the third chapter, should be read very thoroughly, deservedly titled: 'Sombart's fantasies: "the role of Jews" in the Netherlands and the colonisation of the New World'. The chapter that should be recognised as essential to the whole book is chapter four, discussing the rather complicated situation of the new Christians in the longer term. The author does not conceal that the matter is far from being clear, but he puts much effort into its most universal presentation that is possible, as its significance also exceeds the discussed geographical and temporal area. An accurate comment is worth mentioning: 'The dangerous in the eyes of many Catholics and poorly understood phenomenon of the converts and the assimilated Jews, which for example appeared in the Polish lands with full severity until the end of the 19th century, is often an element of nationalistic narration also today, in the world without Jews'.

As it turns out, in the light of not so much the records of the Inquisition

themselves, but owing to the knowledge of the social context in which they were gathered, the causes that were very often more important than the religious motivations were rather mundane, such as family conflicts or emotions of neighbours, such as jealousy and drive towards vengeance, including denunciations (even after many years) from commercial competitors, abandoned spouses or slaves. Therefore, as it turns out, regardless of a vast contribution of energy and religious fervour, functioning of the dangerous Inquisition not always contributed to the defence of the purity of faith, but became an element of rather non-religious clashes. Besides, the main reason preventing full integration of the new Christians with the dominant religious group was the cultural principle of 'blood purity', which was a cause for stigmatisation. On the other hand, both the 'new' and the 'old' Christians conformed in the European racial prejudices against the Africans. As the Author graphically expressed: 'the community of faith was superseded by the level of melanin'. This is an important issue, indicating racial dichotomy that is rooted deeply in the Western culture, which actually has not been fully worked through until the present day.

The central body of the work, (from chapter five to chapter eight) which makes up for one third of the volume, is devoted to an in-depth analysis of economic issues, such as the network of commercial connections, sugar cane plantations and sugar production. The analysis of economic processes is embedded in the political and national context, which also made it possible to present an actual, not mythical, participation of Jews (both the new Christians and the 'new Jews' – those who returned to Judaism and the 'old Jews' – who did not go through the conversion episode. These analyses also reveal a clear image of who actually played the essential role – these were the 'old' Christians (both Catholics and Protestants), whereas the role of Jews was non-independent and auxiliary. However, it is worth noting that these groups combined were developing something that can be called the first globalisation: 'After a passage of less than a hundred years the commercial networks created by new and old Christians, and from the beginning of the 17th century also with the participation of the Amsterdam Jews, all the co-creators of La Nação, will bind together Asia, Europe, Africa and the New World.

An achievement of the book *Nowi chrześcijanie i Żydzi w gospodarce kolonialnej Ameryki Łacińskiej* that should be recognised as exceptional are the final chapters on slavery. They struck with seriousness and reliability in their approach to the subject, primarily the clear presentation of the issue of responsibility of the Europeans, both the Christians and the Jews, for this barbarous episode in our shared history. In my opinion, the findings of Henryk Szlajfer will become a permanent part of the literature of the subject

and they will become an indispensable starting point for further studies. It is also a significant revision to thinking about Europe, in particular of European Christianity as a significant and positive contribution to universal culture. For in the light of the sources it turns out that the Christian thinkers not only could accept African slave trade, but they downright justified it, and it was similar in the case of Judaism. To put it shortly: 'Christian, neo-Christian or Jewish attitude to a slave was expressed in the age of creation of Atlantic economy and at the same time a mental revolution in Europe, which paved the way to the ideas of freedom, primarily, the reification of the African'. Both these religions accepted slavery in the period from the 15th to the 17th centuries as a form of dealing with new challenges of civilisation. However, in the light of the available sources, stating that Jews were primarily the ones who dealt in slave trade, is simply not true.

Like in the case of the alleged monopoly on the trade and production of sugar, such statements carry remnants of mythical thinking, contributed to, to a major extent, by Werner Sombart. In keeping with the historical facts, one should state that the origins of African slavery in Spanish America should be associated with the activity of the 'oldest Christians': the Florentines, the Genoese, the Flemings, the Germans and the Spaniards, whereas this applied to a lesser extent to the Spanish *conversos*, or the Portuguese new Christians. This also fits in with the presence of the latter ones in the other dimensions of economic and social life, where they were rather tolerated, but they never constituted a dominant group. It was not without satisfaction when I noted close cooperation in the New World between the new Christian and the Jesuits based on the example of Bishop Francisco de Vitoria (not to be mistaken with a Dominican theologian bearing the same name, younger by a generation), probably related to the second Superior General of the Society of Jesus, *converso* Diego Laínez Gomez de León, a confidant of Ignatius of Loyola. Of course, such surprising connections were much more numerous, and they also force the Reader to revise many of the established beliefs.

To sum up, it has to be stated that *Nowi chrześcijanie i Żydzi w gospodarce kolonialnej Ameryki Łacińskiej, XVI–XVII w. Zarys problematyki* constitutes an important contribution and indispensable point of reference for further studies on the presence of Jews in civilisational processes in the New World at the threshold of modernity.

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