

## Toward a Repolitization of the Converso Phenomenon in Portugal and Beyond

Guest Editor's Note  
Claude B. Stuczynski

To this day discussions of hidden, underground, and concealed identities often invoke the case of the Iberian conversos—or also known as Marranos or New Christians—so much so, that the term “marranism” has become a paradigm of secret, variegated, divided, or restrained forms of Judaism.<sup>1</sup> These views were celebrated in the past by those who endorsed “essentialist” perceptions of Marrano Jewishness, as well as by scholars who nowadays adopt the idea of a converso “divided,” “liquid,” or “hybrid” self.

One of the depictions that did much to strengthen both views was Samuel Schwarz's *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX* (1925).<sup>2</sup> In this book Schwarz revealed the existence of converso descendants living in twentieth-century Portugal, who maintained crypto-Jewish beliefs, prayers, and practices. His findings aroused much excitement, as official Judaism had been banned from the kingdom since the forced mass conversion of 1497. Between the establishment of the Portuguese Inquisition in 1536 and the “enlightened absolutist” reforms made by the Marquis of Pombal in the second half of the eighteenth century, which included the end of official discrimination against New Christians in 1773, “Judaizing” was branded as a dangerous, punishable heresy. During this long period of time, secrecy played a central role in the preservation of the forbidden “Law of Moses” and became an enduring trait of the Marrano identity. Although Schwarz recognized the abrupt character of mass

conversion and the late establishment of the Holy Office as explanations for the persistence of Portuguese crypto-Judaism—as compared to the more ephemeral Spanish case (with the exception of the converso Chuetas of Majorca)—he paid more attention to the pervading character of the clandestine Marrano lore than to the external reasons that enabled its crystallization and survival.

Schwarz's book was representative of a broader historiographical shift toward an increasing concern regarding New Christian inner identities. During the conception of the book, he was assisted by António Baião, the director of the Inquisition archives at the Torre do Tombo, in Lisbon, who wrote a three-volume work on cases of people convicted by the Portuguese Inquisition. Baião's *Episódios dramáticos da Inquisição portuguesa* (1919–1938), was a sort of “Benjaminian” historiographical project, in the sense that it restituted to the victims of the Holy Office their “stolen voices.”<sup>3</sup> Through the subsequent contributions on the religion of the Marranos made by Cecil Roth in the 1930s, and especially with Israel Salvator Révah's pathbreaking archival studies from the 1950s to the early 1970s, the conviction that an “authentic” history of the New Christians, conceived as “potential Jews,” could only be written by analyzing thousands of inquisitorial trials was reinforced.<sup>4</sup> Later on, especially with the growing influence of social studies in the 1980s and cultural and postcolonial studies in the 1990s, further focus on the conversos' private sphere developed. New Christians came to be seen more as compliant “fuzzy” Jewish-Christians or Christian-Jews than as militant crypto-Jews or potential “New Jews.”<sup>5</sup>

In its initial stages, however, research on the Portuguese converso phenomenon was centered on its overt dimensions. Alexandre Herculano's pioneering *History of the Origin and Establishment of the Portuguese Inquisition* (first published in Portuguese in 1854–1855), narrated the thirty-year struggle between kings and New Christians to establish or prevent the Holy Office in Portugal, pointing to the existence of an influential converso leadership and a sophisticated proconverso lobbying network.<sup>6</sup> According to João Lúcio de Azevedo's comprehensive, albeit racist, 1921 *Historia dos cristãos novos portugueses*, these activities were part of a long-enduring antagonistic struggle between the New Christian minority and the Old Christian majority.<sup>7</sup> This was confirmed by the more empathic collection of articles published by Joaquim Mendes dos Remédios in the second volume of his *Os Judeus em Portugal* (1928), by showing that during the time of the Habsburg dynastic union (1580–1640), converso leaders collectively negotiated the relief of their debased condition vis-à-vis the Inquisition and the restrictive laws of “purity of blood” by obtaining general pardons from popes and kings in exchange for substantial sums of money.<sup>8</sup> Révah expanded on that claim, demonstrating that

Father António Vieira's restless proconverso political activities were supported by other seventeenth-century Jesuits.<sup>9</sup>

After a sort of historiographical hiatus, António José Saraiva adopted a broader political approach in his *Inquisição e Cristãos-Novos* (first edition, 1969), which was imbued with Marxist overtones.<sup>10</sup> Saraiva claimed that the persecutions of the Holy Office and the exclusivist laws of "blood purity" were a superstructural means of preventing the social ascension of the converso "men of the nation," who were perceived as a threatening bourgeois class of "men of commerce." Saraiva was followed by Herman Prins Salomon, who argued that Marrano-Jewish identities were "fabricated" by a hostile environment, through a psychosociological mechanism of "self-fulfilling prophecy."<sup>11</sup> With different emphases, methods, and approaches, all these overt perspectives showed that Portuguese conversos—including those Catholic New Christians who wished to be fully integrated into Old Christian society—were perceived as a de facto political group.

These views, however, are today dismissed by most converso scholarship as being "too rigid," "inaccurate," "partial," or "dogmatic" vis-à-vis the versatile character of converso self-fashioning. The result is that current converso historiography faces a hermeneutical, narrative, and ethical impasse, for it tends to relegate "external" factors—such as persecution, exclusion, class belonging, or political regimes—to the backyards of human agency, in order to focus on the labyrinths of the converso inner self. Moreover, scholars who still insist on the political dimensions of the New Christian phenomenon mostly study the Inquisition, the dynamics of Iberian society, or the laws of purity of blood, but they are less concerned with questions of identity.<sup>12</sup> The result is a highly subjectivized portrait of the "men of the nation."

Should we admit such depoliticized views, which depart from a contradistinction between the outward and the inward, the public life and the private world, or the external images and adjudicated stereotypes vis-à-vis internal self-perceptions of group belonging?<sup>13</sup> My answer is no. It is true that politics—whether conceived as the art or science of government, the competition between interest groups or individuals for power and leadership, or the relations between people living in society—recognizes an interdependent distinction between the private and public spheres. The private world, such as the family or the individual conscience, could not be possible without the recognition of an encompassing public domain. According to Kenneth Minogue, "politics only survives so long as this overarching structure of public law recognizes its own limits."<sup>14</sup> The problem is that the precise boundaries between the private and the public spheres change according to time, place, and culture. Let us, for instance, remember that this is what Guy Debord claimed

in 1967 in his *La société du spectacle*, where he showed the transformation of the Western public sphere into a largely depoliticized private arena.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, private life is often charged with politics, even if Western tradition refuses to accept it as part of its public domain.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, politics could also blur the public and private domains—as, for example, in Jacques Derrida’s political conception of friendship.<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, not to say that especially when identities are consciously struggled for and negotiated in interaction with others, we face what is now called the “politics of identity.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, if identity should be politicized in order to understand its formation, politics must previously be historicized and mapped to clarify its precise contours.

Departing from the conviction that it is time to reunite politics and identity to better understand the converso phenomenon (thus joining the work of Juan Ignacio Pulido Serrano),<sup>19</sup> albeit taking into consideration the current complexities of politics and its implications, an international conference was held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and at Bar-Ilan University (Ramat Gan, Israel) on May 26–28, 2015. “The Political Dimensions of the Converso Phenomenon in Portugal and Beyond” gathered a group of leading historians on these and related topics.

I wish to thank his excellency the Portuguese Ambassador to Israel Miguel de Almeida e Sousa; the embassy’s cultural attaché, Laura Oliva Alon; the Instituto Camões; outgoing Director of The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Gabriel Motzkin; Chair of the Department of General History at Bar-Ilan University, Hilda Nissimi; and the assistant of the General History Department, Revital Yitzhaki, for their financial, logistical, and personal support of the international conference.<sup>20</sup> The articles published here are a peer-reviewed selection of lectures given at that conference.<sup>21</sup>

This special volume consists of a wide range of perceptions on conversos and politics. Some of the articles insist on conversos as reluctant victims of general politics (Moisés Orfali’s paper on seventeenth-century Dutch Brazil, Jorge M. Pedreira’s and Bruno Feitler’s explorations on the Pombal reforms) or as committed agents, in both theory (Yosi Yisraeli’s interpretation of Pablo de Santa Maria’s idea of monarchy) and practice (Nadia Zeldes’s article on converso financiers in late fifteenth-century Sicily, Carsten L. Wilke’s study of Manuel Fernandes Vila Real’s diplomatic activities in seventeenth-century France, and Antonio J. Díaz Rodríguez’s mapping of conversos as ecclesiastical brokers in papal Rome). Kenneth Stow studies one of the major canonical-judicial texts on conversos as a group of baptized New Christians—the *consilium* of Cardinal Pier Paolo Pariseo—while Miriam Bodian analyzes an iconographic representation of “freedom of conscience” by ex-converso Sephardim

of Amsterdam. Others emphasize New Christian political agency, whether on behalf of the “men of the nation” (Ana Paula Lloyd, on Manuel da Gama de Pádua’s converso leadership, and Nathalie Alyon, in the *document* section, on the general pardon of 1605) or as a means of social climbing (Ana Isabel Lopes-Salazar, in her study on the Ximenes de Aragão family). José Alberto Tavim elaborates on the politics of identity, by showing how the self-image of a tiny group of early modern nonconverso baptized Jews living in Iberia was built upon antagonism with the New Christian *nação* (nation). The majority of the authors naturally focus on the early modern Portuguese converso phenomenon, whether in the Iberian Peninsula, in the colonial domains (Aliza Moreno-Goldschmidt, on local elites in seventeenth-century Cartagena de Indias), or in the Western Sephardi Diaspora.

Some, however, study the genealogical foundations of the idea of a converso “Hebrew nation,” whether in late medieval Spain (Cedric Cohen Skalli, on Isaac Abravanel’s theological-political views of Jews and conversos as a *sui generis* metahistoric nation) or in papal Rome (James W. Nelson Novoa, in his “genealogical” consideration of the converso group as one of the Christian “nations” before the Holy See). A few authors deal with Majorca’s converso Chuetas (Nitai Shinan, on eighteenth-century initiatives to obtain a converso “emancipation”) and the Spanish Moriscos—mostly, but not exclusively, from a rewarding comparatist approach (Asher Salah, on the Morisco presence in Sicily, and Isabelle Poutrin, on the Jewish precedent of the conversion of the Moriscos). For beyond the specificity of the Portuguese New Christian phenomenon, all sorts of Iberian conversos, along with Moriscos and other early modern ethnic and/or religious minorities, were byproducts of confessional policies and corporate societies of the emerging modern state.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this variegated “critical mass” of high scholarship addresses a “chiaroscuro” early modern political engraving that is more severe and contrasting than the “colorful” postmodern picture of a converso solipsistic self. However, I believe that the former is a historically more accurate, intellectually more challenging, and ethically more dignified portrait of the New Christians and other similar groups.

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#### Notes

- 1 For example, *Elaine Marks, Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 2 Samuel Schwarz, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX* [The New Christians in Portugal in the twentieth century] (Lisbon: Empresa Portuguesa de Livros Lda., 1925); Schwarz, "The Crypto-Jews of Portugal," *Menorah Journal* 12 (1926): 138–149, 283–297.
- 3 António Baião, *Episódios dramáticos da Inquisição portuguesa* [Dramatic episodes of the Portuguese Inquisition], 3 vols. (Porto: Renascença Portuguesa, 1919-1938).
- 4 Cecil Roth, "The Religion of the Marranos," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 22 (1931): 1–33; Israel Salvator Révah, "Les Marranes" [The Marranos], *Revue des Études Juives* 118 (1959-1960): 29–77.
- 5 On the implications of the term "New Jews," which was coined by Yosef Kaplan to denote the ex-converso Jewish "returnees" in the Sephardi Diaspora, see Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Western Sephardi Diaspora in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000).
- 6 Alexandre Herculano, *History of the Origin and Establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal*, trans. John C. Branner, prolegomenon by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1972).
- 7 João Lúcio de Azevedo, *Historia dos cristãos novos portugueses* [History of the Portuguese New Christians] (Lisbon: Livraria Clássica Editora de A.M. Teixeira, 1921).
- 8 Joaquim Mendes dos Remédios, *Os Judeus em Portugal* [The Jews in Portugal], vol. 2 (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora Lda., 1928).

- 9 Israel Salvator Révah, “Les Jésuites portugais contre l’Inquisition: la campagne pour la création de la Compagnie Générale du Commerce du Brésil” [Portuguese Jesuits against the Inquisition: The campaign for the creation of the General Company of Commerce of Brazil], in *Études portugaises* [Portuguese studies], ed. Charles Amiel (Paris: Centre Calouste Gulbenkian, 1975), 155–183.
- 10 António José Saraiva, *The Marrano Factory: The Portuguese Inquisition and Its New Christians 1536–1765*, trans., rev., and augmented by H. P. Salomon and I. S. D. Sassoon (Leiden: Brill, 2001).
- 11 Herman Prins Salomon, *Portrait of a New Christian: Fernão Álvares Melo (1569-1632)*, with contributions by J. de Lange, prefatory remarks by José V. de Pina Martins (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1982).
- 12 Fernanda Olival, *As ordens militares e o estado moderno: honra, mercê e venalidade em Portugal (1641-1789)* [The military orders and the modern state: Honor, mercy and venality in Portugal (1641–1789)] (Lisbon: Estar, 2001); Ana Isabel López-Salazar Codes, *Inquisición y política: El gobierno del Santo Oficio en el Portugal de los Austrias (1578-1653)* [Inquisition and politics: The government of the Holy Office in the Portugal of the Habsburgs (1578–1653)] (Lisbon: Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2011); João Figueirôa-Rego, “A Honra alheia por um fio”: *Os estatutos de limpeza de sangue nos espaços de expressão ibérica (sécs. XVI-XVIII)* [“Honor estranged by a thread”: The laws of purity of blood in the Iberian expression spaces (sixteenth–seventeenth centuries)] (Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2011); Giuseppe Marcocci and José Pedro Paiva, *História da Inquisição Portuguesa, 1536-1821* [History of the Portuguese Inquisition, 1536–1821] (Lisbon: A Esfera dos Livros, 2013).
- 13 “If the identity of the ‘people of the Nation’ is defined, in some sense, in reaction to the animosity they encounter from the other nations (following Spinoza’s hypothesis), this identity also contains a fundamental and positive component: loyalty to forebears. Above and beyond their diversity, the members of ‘the Nation’ did indeed share a common faith: the faith of remembrance”: Nathan Wachtel, *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths*, trans. Nikki Halpern, foreword by Yosef Kaplan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 14.
- 14 Kenneth Minogue, *Politics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.
- 15 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 16 Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny and the Power of Life and Death* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Giorgio Agamben, *L’uso dei corpi* [The use of the bodies] (Vicenza, Italy: Neri Pozza, 2014).
- 17 Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).
- 18 Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *Identities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

- 19 Juan Ignacio Pulido Serrano, "Plural Identities: The Portuguese New Christians," *Jewish History* 25 (2011): 129–151.
- 20 See <http://www.vanleer.org.il/en/event/political-dimensions-converso-phenomenon-portugal-and-beyond>.
- 21 The conference was the culmination of the individual research grant project No. 1641/12 of the Israel Science Foundation: "Portuguese Conversos as a Public Phenomenon: Politics and Apologetics, 16th–17th Centuries."
- 22 Rosario Villari, *Elogio della dissimulazione: la lotta politica nel Seicento* [The praise of dissimulation: Political strife in the seventeenth century] (Rome: Laterza, 1987); Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); James Amelang, *Parallel Histories: Muslims and Jews in Inquisitorial Spain* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).