

Henryk Szlajfer, *Współtwórcy atlantyckiego świata: Nowi chrześcijanie i Żydzi w gospodarce kolonialnej Ameryki Łacińskiej XVI-XVII wieku* [Co-creators of the Atlantic World: New Christians and Jews in the Colonial Economy of Latin America in the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Century], Warsaw: Scholar, 2018, 247 pp.

Henryk Szlajfer's book deals with a matter essential for understanding modernity, namely, the process of formation of the Atlantic world. It is shown through activities of two groups defined as new Christians (*conversos*) and Jews. In fact they were one community, that is, descendants of Sephardic Jews, both those who converted to Catholicism and those who remained in the faith of their forefathers. The author focuses particular attention on those coming from Portugal, defined as *La Nação*, that is, a nation connected by common origin. The book presents the picture of this group, its activities, growth and collapse in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and, first of all, tries to describe the role which these people played in the emergence of the Atlantic world. It is also an attempt to sort out the centuries-long stereotypes or prejudices, which are also revealed in the historiography. The author carefully considers all aspects of the undertaken task, demystifying not only the current concepts, but also views strongly embedded in the historiography.

One should agree with the author that in the process of formation of the Atlantic world we can differentiate many other groups of entrepreneurs, financiers and merchants. One of them, close due to the genesis of its formation, was created by the milieu of Sephardic Jews who settled in the Republic of the Seven Provinces of the United Netherlands. Differentiating the two groups connected with the Iberian Peninsula is justified by their particular activity both in organizing of trade in slaves from Angola and in building the Brazilian sugar industry. However, Szlajfer's reasoning leaves no doubt: these two groups did not play a decisive role in creating the Atlantic world. Nevertheless, the author does not treat the place taken by them as the most important issue; he mainly wants to recon-

struct the process of their integration into the communities of America. He focuses his effort on the reconstruction of their involvement in the Brazilian, or, broadly speaking, American economy to construct a panorama of evolution of the group he is interested in. An evolution which led to its disappearance before the end of the eighteenth century. The author has performed this task in a talented way, showing great erudition and insight. And here one could end the review, stressing also the smooth narration and benefits that can flow from reading it.

To do so, however, would be unjust and unjustified laziness. There is also another reason for serious consideration of this book, since it is, regardless of the author's intents, a substantial contribution to the discussion of the process of formation of identity. And not only the Latin American one.

The book consists of thirteen chapters, including 'Wprowadzenie' (Introduction) and 'Zakończenie' (Conclusion), which are larger in scope than these titles formally suggest. One can even discuss with the author over whether the selected form of the ending is the most appropriate. I expected a summary of the issues signalled in the 'Introduction': how to explain this 'flash' of new Christians and Jews' activity in the sixteenth and the eighteenth century and the disappearance of this group in America in the eighteenth century. And what comes of it? Especially for the essential problem of co-creating the world. I also mean the question about connection between identity changes and formation of the world, since when the Atlantic world had already been formed, *La Nação*, so closely linked with this formation, ceased to exist. All this is presented in detail and interpreted in a convincing way, but such a short summary would be very useful, especially if the author had dealt with the problem of shaping the sense of community and reaction to the disintegration process. Such conclusions would have been invaluable for those interested in the problem of the defence of identity and the search for a new one.

It is worth realizing that Henryk Szlajfer decided to deal with a giant subject, since if we want to specify the share of a certain group's participation in creation of the Atlantic world, we must have a clear vision of the process of emergence of this reality. And not only in its economic dimension. We speak about Spanish America, from Florida to Buenos Aires, about Brazil and its borderlands, about the Caribbean and even about European possessions at the north of the continent. We also mean the Atlantic Ocean and the problem of trade, including ores and goods transfer, and, first of all, deliveries of African labour. So we cannot avoid speaking about Portugal's African possessions, mainly about Angola and European competition for these regions. This faced the author with serious problems. The first one is familiarization with a massive literature, and the second — constructing reasoning in a way that allows the reader to follow the author's thought. The second one is, as we know, the major challenge.

This explains why the author used secondary literature and printed primary sources. Archival research in this respect would take many years. And one cannot be certain whether access to new archival materials would bring any important

findings. Szlajfer looks for synthesis and — it should be stressed — does it with gusto. One can feel that this method of work suits him very much. I mean also a precise enrichment of narration with footnotes referring to the literature. The bibliography fills thirty six pages and is complete. An exception is the absence of readings from the circle of Walter Mignolo and Enrique Dussel, that is the so called de-colonial trend. It is *nota bene* presented in Filip Kubiaczyk's monograph *Nowoczesność, kolonialność i tożsamość: perspektywa latynoamerykańska*, Poznań, 2013 (Modernity, Coloniality and Identity: The Latin American Perspective). Studies on this academic formation relate in fact to a different period and even different problems, but revisionists' approach seems worth taking into account, also within the scope of research undertaken by Henryk Szlajfer. Anyway, undertaking a task planned as a synthesis the author had the right to rely on the existing literature. And I want to add that his commentaries to the old and newer positions are often juicy and one reads them with satisfaction.

This quality is not very frequent — Szlajfer has thought over his readings very thoroughly, and when he writes about them, his perception is often new and thought-provoking.

The Table of Contents reflects very well the content of the volume and the author's way of thinking. The Introduction is a perfect outline of the problem, that is, the role of the studied group in a broadly understood genesis of America and the drama of its confrontation with Holy Inquisition persecutions, until its ultimate dispersal in colonial societies in the eighteenth century. The first chapters introduce us to the subject: its terminology and differentiation, presenting the specific position of 'the Portuguese', the debate with opinions on the role of Jews, including the theses of Werner Sombart. In Chapter 4 we have a fine presentation of the problem of new Christians as a group being of key importance in the development of trade in African slaves. I believe that Szlajfer managed to sort out contradictions accompanying *conversos* from the time they appeared until today. These contradictions were not limited to the fact that new Christians considered themselves full-fledged Catholics, whereas old Christians continued to suspect them of Judaizing. I consider the reasoning presenting complex motivations of activities taken toward this group and equally complicated defence actions to be an example of a model interpretation of a very complex problem.

The next six chapters, over one third of the book, bring a very detailed presentation of the problems of trade and production connected with the Iberians' Atlantic. With the appearance of mass production of sugar in Brazil, the need to provide labour became urgent, so consequently a large-scale trade in slaves had to be organized. The role of new Christians is presented here in a very detailed way, emphasizing the specifics of economic activities of *conversos*. Szlajfer showed how *La Nação*, the new and old Christians, with participation of Amsterdam Jews connected the Old and the New World with a network of economic activity (Chapters 7 and 10. This is a very precise analysis.

Chapter 11 leads us out of Atlantic and shows different fates of *conversos* in Spanish America. This chapter is very useful for a better understanding of the

genesis and consequences of persecutions of new Christians by the Holy Inquisition. The final chapter titled '*Tempo dos flamengos* — nowi Żydzi w nowej Holandii' (*Tempo dos flamengos* — New Jews in the New Netherlands) is a splendid summary of reflections on the changes of Jews' identity in the modern epoch. As I have already mentioned, this chapter is inevitable for closing the construction of the book, not for summing up the whole of it. Szlajfer links the struggle for establishing Dutch estates in Brazil with the concurrent activity of the local *conversos* and Sephardic Jews from Amsterdam. He also discusses attempts to establish a Portugal trade company.

We have received a book which is important and worth recommendation. We should thank the author for dealing with an important subject and congratulate him for the manner of his performance.

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(Translated by Elżbieta Petrajtis-O'Neill)