

## Colonial History – Sephardic Perspectives

**Veranstalter:** Sina Rauschenbach, Universität Potsdam

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The conference „Colonial History – Sephardic Perspectives“ hosted by Sina Rauschenbach (Potsdam) at Potsdam University from October 27th to October 29th tasked its participants with the ambitious endeavor to combine the two fields of research that gave the conference its name. They were asked to view Jews and Conversos in the context of the colonial societies they lived in and to go beyond binary categories of black and white, colonizers and colonized, etc. Giving up the idea of Sephardic history as an isolated phenomenon, the question arose of how Jews and Conversos interacted with others, with Spanish Catholics, black slaves and indigenous people. What role did Sephardic Jews play in the colonial history of their respective countries? Did they contribute to colonial undertakings in the New World and if so, how and to what extent? What did historians make of the Sephardim as a group within colonial history?

Participants were also encouraged to not limit themselves strictly to methods of historiography and to pick topics one might consider exotic or peculiar, such as JAN JANSEN's (Washington) intriguing analysis of Jewish connections to Freemasonry and the establishment of Jewish Lodges in the Caribbean as a reaction to exclusion from already existing Lodges. JOSÉ ALBERTO TAVIM (Lisbon) took a look at the messianic discourses in Judaism as well as Christianity that were fueled by the expansion of the Portuguese Empire and the discovery of new worlds. His presentation led to a discussion on whether Jews caught in the torrent of messianic anticipation of redemption would have openly proselytized if they had not been forbidden to do so by Catholic authorities.

JONATHAN SCHORSCH (Potsdam) had the honour of opening the conference. In his presentation „New Christian Slave-Trading:

Ideology and the Formation of Scholarship“ he described how historians have thus far dealt with the role New Christians, that is Christians whose ancestors were at some point Jewish, played in colonial history. But he added a controversial twist to this by specifically asking how historians have tackled the issue of New Christians in the slave trade. He compared two groups of scholars: The first being Iberian scholars who allotted them much influence in the slave trade and by that once again proving the antisemitic assumption that Jews, because to them New Christians still counted as Jews, would do just anything for money – even selling slaves. On the other end of the scale Schorsch placed a group of Jewish scholars who ignore or deny New Christian participation in the slave trade altogether. By pitting these two extreme views, that are by no means the only views, on Sephardic history against each other, Schorsch reminded us as scholars that we always have to remember, reflect upon, and question our standing in time and history and the agenda and ideology we might - unconsciously - be following. Even though his presentation was not meant to be a keynote address, it set the tone for the overall conference. Almost every presentation that followed either had a controversial approach or took up a topic that is in itself controversial. Furthermore, methodological problems, insecurities and doubts came up and were debated throughout the three days of the conference.

Possibly the most rewarding and eye-opening contribution in terms of methodology came from MAX SEBASTIÁN HERING TORRES (Bogotá). In his presentation „Exclusion in Transfer: „Jewish Blood“ and „Black Blood“ in the 17th and 18th Centuries“, he analyzed how both Jews and Blacks were segregated by a set of various exclusionary mechanisms, such as *limpieza de sangre* and the probes of purity of blood that followed or the Iberian caste system. He especially drew attention to how the very same person could be judged completely differently in a different setting or social situation. Thus a Jew could be considered white, and thus superior, when in the company of indigenous people or slaves, yet when the same Jew was set in an overall Spanish-catholic context he could be per-

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ceived as black, meaning inferior.

Given the rather theoretical nature of his topic, Hering Torres quickly came to speak about the anachronisms historians, or any scholar of any field who deals with the past, by nature of time and language itself have to face in their work. The audience probably appreciated it the most that he offered a way to lessen the methodological agony when handling abstract concepts such as antisemitism, *limpieza de sangre* or forms of racism in general: He suggested to carefully differentiate between race as an object of study and race as an analytical category.

This reminder led JOSÉ DA SILVA HORTA (Lisbon) to alter his manner of talking about race and rather speak of „the idea of race“ from now on. A resolution he promptly carried out in his and PETER MARK's (Middletown) presentation titled „Senegambian Sephardic Communities in the 17th Century and the Connections with their United Provinces Bases: Was „Racial“ Thought an Issue?“ on *limpieza de sangre* and its application. Their presentation triggered a debate on whether a concept of race can be morally neutral, that is to say a mere way of telling groups in society apart without making positive or negative assumptions or judgements. The outcome seemed to be that the horrors brought forth by biological racism and antisemitism as seen in the 20th century are far too strong to not view earlier yet comparable situations of Othering and social exclusion based on outer appearance, religion and culture through a morally - and morally disproving - lens.

INEKE PHAF-RHEINBERGER (Berlin), using the life of Gaspar Barlaeus as an example, focused on the consequences global politics of expansion could have on individuals who suddenly found themselves caught in between social groups, in between Europe and the New World or in between religious and political loyalties. Her presentation was especially important, because it drew attention to Portugal and its colony Brazil which are often unjustly subsumed under the Spanish Empire and its expansion regardless of times of Portuguese independence. Its biographical focus also gave participants the opportunity to apply the theoretical suggestions that had been

brought up during earlier presentations and discussions to actual cases

The geographical focus on Portugal continued to be a theme for the following two presentations as well. TIRTSAH LEVIE-BERNFELD's (Amsterdam/ Berlin) presentation „The Migration Policy of the Amsterdam Portuguese Community“ dealt with the Amsterdam Portuguese Community's attempt to steer and regulate the influx of poor Sephardic immigrants. She put special emphasis on the question of who was considered poor and how those poor Sephardim were chosen, encouraged or even pressured to emigrate to the Caribbean. In contrast to Levie-Bernfeld's intragroup focus, JESSICA ROITMAN (Leiden) and MICHA BRUMLIK (Berlin) both dealt with intergroup relations between Jews and people deemed „Others“. Jessica Roitman stressed that boundaries, be they cultural or religious, as well as geographical frontiers not only define differences, but at the same time offer the opportunity for economic and cultural exchange, for overcoming them and forming new relationships. Micha Brumlik shed light on the repercussions New Christian involvement in slave trade during the colonial era had on the relationship between Jews and Blacks during the North American Civil Rights Movement. It became clear how a shared history, especially one burdened with suffering and injustice, can complicate the relations between groups even centuries later. Thus we were reminded again that history does not exist in small isolated moments in time.

Ideas on how history and memory interact with and shape each other was ANA SOBRAL's (Zürich) contribution to the conference. She chose a controversial methodological approach to make her point. She took - some historians might say she dared to take - popular historical novels as examples for how history can be preserved and transferred through time. However, she did not analyze them from a purely literary studies perspective, but rather used the literary changes of historical facts to assert her claim that memory does not simply conserve history but always makes claims on the past and its interpretation.

The topic IRIS IDELSON-SHEIN (Frank-

furt am Main) chose for her presentation „Mimicry and „Masa“ in the Jewish Haskalah“ bordered on the field of literary studies as well. It also made a connection between colonial history and Ashkenazic history. While direct Ashkenazic participation in early modern colonial expansion is less relevant compared to Sephardic participation, forms of Othering and segregation inherent to Imperialism did echo in Ashkenazic thought. She outlined how the Maskilim made use of analogies to „the Savage“ in Jewish versions of popular children’s travel literature to further the cause of Jewish assimilation and explained how travel worked as a metaphor for the Maskilim’s experience of their own social enterprises. She also made clear how traveling and encountering the savage Other functioned as an Europeaniser for Jews. Once Jewish travellers had left Europe they could present themselves as Europeans and the further away from home they were, the more European – and white – they became. Idelson-Shein described the same whitening effect a change of social context and environment can have on minorities considered black in their society of origin that Max Hering Torres mentioned when talking about indigenous people and colonizers in the New World.

As mentioned at the beginning, the conference had a subtle controversial feeling to it. During the final discussion BORIS BARTH (Konstanz) asked why Jewish scholars are having such a hard time dealing with the issue of slavery. According to him, Jewish or New Christian participation was not surprising at all, because slavery was a global phenomenon at the time and everyone was at some point and to some extent involved in it or affected by it. He made an important point by putting the historical Jews and New Christians into this broader global context. The problem is that historians at some point began to morally judge first rather than describe the sources, interpret them, put them in context and then draw conclusions from their findings. Institutional bonds could also have led past scholars to look for results that fit their institution’s policy and ideology or alter results to make them meet expectations. The issue of Sephardic involvement in slave trade becomes painful, or even that unbearable that it

has to be denied altogether, only when historians take their personal assumptions and preferences or their institution’s bias into their research. During the conference the participants made an effort to remind themselves of these pitfalls of historiography.

Yet the first step to remedy the current situation has already been made. The fact that scholars from various academic and religious backgrounds were invited to talk about a topic that was considered territory of historians, and mostly Jewish historians only decades ago, proves this change. The new generation of scholars taking an interest in Sephardic history and culture is honest enough to acknowledge their bias and professional enough to put their personal religious and political beliefs aside and publish their findings – even if that means pointing out that Jews were victims, namely forced converts, and perpetrators, slave owners and traders, at the same time.

#### **Conference overview:**

Thomas Brechenmacher (Potsdam), Sina Rauschenbach (Potsdam): Inauguration and Introduction

Jonathan Schorsch (Potsdam): New Christian Slave-Trading: Ideology and the Formation of Scholarship

Max Sebastián Hering Torres (Bogotá): Exclusion in Transfer: „Jewish Blood“ and „Black Blood“ in the 17th and 18th Centuries

Chairs: Michael Heinzmann (Potsdam), Klaus Weber (Frankfurt/Oder), Christoph Schulte (Potsdam), Nicole Waller (Potsdam)

José Alberto Tavim (Lisbon): Galut and Empire: In the Way of a Final Redemption

Peter Mark (Middletown, CT), José da Silva Horta (Lisbon): Senegambian Sephardic Communities in the 17th Century and the Connections with their United Provinces Bases: Was “Racial” Thought an Issue?

Micha Brumlik (Berlin): Sephardim in the American Southern States: Attitudes Towards Slavery

Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger (Berlin): Barlaeus In-Between Africa and America

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Tirtsah Levie-Bernfeld (Amsterdam /Berlin):  
The Migration Policy of the Amsterdam Portuguese Community

Jessica Roitman (Leiden): In Between the Intermediaries: Jews, Amerindians, and Enslaved People in the Mediation of Colonial Authority

Jan Jansen (Washington): Imperial Freemasonry and the Sephardic Jews in the Caribbean (18th — 19th Centuries)

Chair: Liliana Ruth Feierstein (Berlin)

Iris Idelson-Shein (Frankfurt am Main): Mimicry and „Masa“ in the Jewish Haskalah

Ana Sobral (Zürich): Jamaican Jews: History and Memory

Boris Barth (Konstanz): Final Discussion

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