

Sociological Commentary on *Vigilant Society: Jewish Thought and the State in Medieval Spain* by Javier Roiz. State University of New York Press (2014)

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The book of Roiz is like a diamond with many faces and many angles. Here we want to comment only on those aspects of this book which have most directly served our research objectives, while encouraging other readers to comment on the many diverse interests of this work.

For our part we have read it above all from three points of view: that of Historical Sociology, that of Political Science, and that of a Tönnesian-oriented Sociology.

A sociological interpretation of the work of Américo Castro (2024) leads us to think that of the three juxtaposed societies on the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, it was the Catholic society which would eventually dominate the Islamic and Jewish societies by means of a relentless, daily and ubiquitous deprecation –an endeavor focused especially upon the Jewish caste.

That is why Roiz's book is important from the point of view of Historical Sociology. Because by describing to us the impressive characteristics of the Sephardic Culture (its industriousness, its literacy, its commercial and diplomatic skills, its medicine, its sophisticated thinking in regard to public space, etc. etc.) that book reveals to us the social characteristics of Catholic Spain, precisely because it developed for centuries due to a systematic hostility towards any aspect of Sephardic Spain.

And this is not a trait that has remained in the past nor a trait surpassed by the expulsion of the diverse Jewish populations in 1492. On the contrary,

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our current, overweighted *familial* orientation, i.e., our incorrigible nepotism (Moya, 1975), is largely the result of that never-interrupted cultural elaboration throughout centuries, which has continued (and still continues today) indefatigably recreating, always updated, that counter-meritocratic militancy.

Secondly, Roiz's book is also significant in terms of its attempt to construct a true political theory -a political theory able to take into account the increasingly suffocating limits of our Western sociability. This novel political theory should not consist of a mere recurring apology of our way of life -on the contrary, it ought to be capable of seeing itself from the outside and therefore capable of questioning its own foundations.

According to Roiz, Maimonides (1135 – 1204) offers a different starting point for the construction of this political theory than does Aristotle. While the Greek correctly sees the foundation of human society in language, Maimonides (1963) is also correct in perceiving that foundation in the helplessness with which the baby enters the world. For it is precisely from this helplessness of the infant that human life becomes a compulsive struggle to strengthen one's own power (*libido dominandi*). We agree with Roiz that this concept of Maimonides can be *the seed*, the foundational cornerstone for a new political theory, which would be truly capable of educating the individual in regard to his personal governance, something which is increasingly scarce in Western societies. Due to their Calvinistic orientation, the author defines these societies as “*vigilant*” -- for reasons which seem obvious to us since we have read his book.

Finally, in as much as we are Tönnesian sociologists, we must thank Roiz's book for making us aware of the existence of the “*responsa*”. The *responsa* were written responses provided by the Rabbis to the written queries made by the residents of the “*aljamas*” [Jewish quarters] in regard to all topics. They amount to a notarial record of Sephardic daily life throughout the centuries, a *direct journey* to the heart of the old patriarchal rationality, which guided (for better or worse) the pre-modern world --especially in Iberia... One could say that those “*responsa*” reunite only the events which happened in the neighborhoods surrounding the Jewish Synagogue, however not in those surrounding the Catholic Church nor in those surrounding the Islamic Mosque. True, but those three communities, even with their different cultural imprints, could not but subscribe to the patriarchal rationality that was endemic to them. This rationality was an inevitable characteristic of a mode of social structuring which neither would be nor *could be* broken until much later by the most advanced capitalist domination.

Given our Tönnesian orientation, it is not surprising that the preservation of such *responsa* should seem important to us. Despite current thought to the contrary, we think that nowadays it is in fact even more useful than ever *to bear in mind* this patriarchal wisdom ... Well, as Antonio Machado already said in his *Songs and Proverbs* (1982: 193):

“It's good to recall
the old sayings.
Their time's not up yet.”

In summary, let us encourage the readers of Social Science (especially those Iberians and Latin Americans, however not exclusively these) to read this work written by Javier Roiz and published in Spanish in 2008. Subsequently, Selma L. Margaretten translated the book to English to then be published in 2014 by New York State University (SUNY).

One would assuredly find many themes of interest within Roiz's pages. For on those pages, there resonate the wise voices of the great Sephardic masters; ancient voices, to be certain, however voices charged with future wisdom and generously updated for us by Professor Roiz.

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