

Review of James S. Amelang, *Parallel Histories: Muslims and Jews in Inquisitorial Spain*

Adam G. Beaver
Princeton University, beaver@fake.com

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James S. Amelang. *Parallel Histories: Muslims and Jews in Inquisitorial Spain*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. 224 pp.

As a steady stream of op-eds and cautionary memoirs attests, it is bleak going for graduate students in the humanities. The tenure-track jobs which ought to await them post-PhD have become as scarce as the poorly defended conference buffets on which they once subsisted. In the case of graduate students interested in early modern Spain, however, there is at least one respect in which they ought to be envied: the reading lists have never been better. Laden with a surplus of exciting monographs, they are newly crowned by three books which should become mainstays for any student prepping his or her exams. The first two, put out by Yale, are great *summae* in the guise of memoirs: J.H Elliott's *History in the Making* (2012) and Jonathan Brown's *In the Shadow of Velázquez* (2013). The third is James Amelang's deeply learned and unfailingly judicious *Parallel Histories*, a comparative survey of the divergent fates of conversos and moriscos across the long sixteenth century.

Parallel Histories is not, strictly speaking, new; a Spanish version, published by Akal under the title Historias paralelas: Judeoconversos y moriscos en la España moderna, has been in circulation since 2011. It will be a long time, however, before anyone calls this book "old." As he admits, Amelang is not generally known as a scholar of Spain's religious minorities, but he has achieved something remarkable here. In the space of a modest volume, he has managed to re-see the cultural and institutional matrices which forged the lives of Spain's religious minorities through the lenses of anthropology and social history, transcending historians' usual doctrinal and genealogical preoccupations in favor of recapturing the full range of actual experiences which conversos and moriscos faced, and—more importantly—the choices which they could, and did, make. (In this regard, Amelang is more than a little reminiscent of Natalie Zemon Davis, who also began with urban history before turning later in her career to the "braided histories" of Muslims and Jews who found themselves on the margins of European life.) The result is revelatory—if not in an archival sense, then certainly in the way that it re-frames and re-opens the questions and problems which dominate the historiography of the Iberian Peninsula's long and tumultuous religious settlement ca. 1391–1614. Where *were* the descendants of Jews and Muslims supposed to fit in the new society which Fernando and Isabel set in motion? Why, *really*, did their presence so trouble Old Christians? Was there a New Christian experience?

Such questions follow naturally from *Parallel Histories*' two goals. The first is simply to lay out, in a diplomatic, but shrewdly discerning fashion, the

state of the field in converso and morisco studies. This, of course, means telling us what we already (ought to) know, and Amelang proves himself a voracious bibliographer, reading widely across the Iberian and Anglophone literature as well as deeply, reminding us of what endures from well over half a century of scholarship. But surveys of this nature should also admit what we do not know, and what we cannot generalize, and Amelang's frank discussion of some contested topics—like the extent to which conversos remained an identifiable group within Iberian society—is refreshing in its restraint, even-handedness, and nuance. Readers looking for a single “Amelang thesis” will not find one here, as he repeatedly eschews unitary theories or generalizations in favor of ramifying lists of two, three, four, or more carefully circumscribed statements about this or that aspect of minority culture or minority-majority interaction.

Amelang's second goal is to put the two literatures about conversion—Muslim and Jewish—into conversation. As Amelang notes, this is something which is not done nearly as often as one would think, even though almost everyone who teaches early modern Spain has been buttonholed at some point by a student who wants to know why the Catholic Monarchs' Muslim subjects were treated so differently from their Jewish counterparts. If anything, the story we tell seems counterintuitive: why was the group which had been assimilating throughout the Middle Ages, and which had close relations with the Crown, reviled and expelled, while the group which had been fighting a war against the Monarchy allowed to stay and treated reasonably compassionately (at least at first)? And yet, why were Jewish conversos, who were treated as more “racially” suspect than the moriscos, more successfully assimilated after 1492? The explanations are complex and layered: to some extent, the difference has to do with cultural anxiety and the fear of converso “in-betweenness” documented by David Nirenberg and others; but one can also point to economic, familiar, and social structures which influenced the divergent fate of the moriscos. Such explanations are not new, *per se*; but it is quite fascinating to see them presented side-by-side in *Parallel Histories* in a way that allows one to think more comparatively than is usually the norm. At the very least, Amelang's decision to tell these two stories in parallel amounts to a salutary reminder that modern historians' preoccupations with lineage and the legal structures of assimilation and discrimination are only part of the story, and do not adequately capture the full range of strategies and negotiations in which New and Old Christians engaged.

In sum, it is hard to find fault with this brilliantly-executed synthesis; even when Amelang ventures a provocative or contrarian thesis, he does so in the most constructive of ways, backed by sound documentation. On that note, it is worth

mentioning this book's one weakness (if that is the term): namely, that LSU Press has not reproduced the massive endnotes/bibliographical essay which constituted fully half of the aforementioned Spanish edition of the book. The decision is understandable, as the majority of the notes and references point to sources and specialized discussions which require a reading knowledge of Spanish—in which case one might as well consult *Historias paralelas* directly. Nevertheless, it is a shame that the staggering breadth and depth of Amelang's reading will remain somewhat obscured to readers who peruse only the English edition.

Adam G. Beaver
Princeton University