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"Anything and Everything": the Problematic Life of *Convivencia*

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The 2016 Meta E. Gilpatrick prize essay

“ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING”: THE PROBLEMATIC LIFE OF *CONVIVENCIA*

Abigail Hartman

In early 2015, poet and novelist Steven Nightingale published his first piece of nonfiction. *Granada: A Pomegranate in the Hand of God* is in some ways the author’s love-letter to the city in southern Spain, an expression of appreciation for the rich culture and complex past of a place that “has had an uncanny influence in the history of Europe and the world. It is a hive of stories, of sweetness, and of secrets. We might call it a pomegranate in the hand of God.”¹ The pomegranate stands in the book as a symbol of the multicultural, multireligious society of al-Andalus—a society which, in its peaceful heyday when “the three principal religious communities of the Mediterranean settled down to live together,” produced a wealth of literature, architecture, and art.²

Nightingale’s goal is to bring these achievements to light, a pursuit he likens to “the excavation of buried treasure” that over the years has been “lost under layers of confusion, ideology, propaganda, ignorance, religious animosity, indifference, and hot debate.”³ Expressing frustration with academics who would complicate, minimize, or even dismiss this cultural

¹ Steven Nightingale, *Granada: A Pomegranate in the Hand of God* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 120-121.

³ *Ibid.*, 198.

zenith,⁴ and desiring “to let the work of the period speak for itself,”⁵ he embarks on an experiential, sensual exploration of al-Andalus’ artistic triumphs: its enduring Islamic architecture; the musical tradition of *flamenco*; the poetry and philosophy of such men as Samuel ibn Neghrela, a Jew who served as a general and vizier under Muslim rule, and Ramon Llull, a Franciscan who also translated Muslim writings and studied Jewish mysticism. All of these wonders, he argues, were made possible only by the pluralism of Spain’s medieval days, by the coexistence, known as *convivencia*, of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Though not himself a historian, his perspective on the *convivencia* is worth quoting at length, as it embodies one extreme in the debate that has been ongoing since the term was introduced to historiography in the mid-20th century:

The *convivencia* was a dangerous experiment. It proceeded by fits and starts, setbacks and abominations, strange alliances, unexpected advances, and practical ingenuities. Its achievements, only recently come into focus, were without precedent in Europe. It is a school-room where we might learn, we who even now are failing disastrously to live together at a time with much more dangerous weapons and billions of lives at stake. And we might start by learning from its fate, when in the fifteenth century al-Andalus, with all its accumulated knowledge and accomplishments, met King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel. The two monarchs brought to the Iberian peninsula a will to power, a formidable union, a sense of messianic duty, and, in 1480, their own

⁴ Such dismissal, he implies, can only be explained as the result of sheer bigotry and unwillingness to accept the influence of non-Christian cultures in the making of Spain; see *ibid.*, 246.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

specially designed government agency: the Holy Inquisition.⁶

Indeed, Nightingale's take on medieval Spain represents everything that inspires Maya Soifer in her 2009 article "Beyond *Convivencia*" to reject the word altogether. In her view *convivencia* is "loaded with a cacophony of problematic associations,"⁷ including a portrait of medieval Spain as a uniquely harmonious society in contrast with a backwards, intolerant Europe. Indeed, she believes the term has been so debated and manipulated over time that it can only have associations, not substance: "*Convivencia* can be anything and everything," and, at the same time, nothing. "Why use a term weighted down by ideological contentiousness and corrupted by generalizations and unprovable assumptions?" she asks rhetorically.⁸

Soifer's article is part of a recent historiographical backlash against the term first coined, or at least popularized, by Américo Castro in 1948.⁹ *Convivencia* itself appears at first

⁶ Ibid., 188. In an endnote Nightingale admits the contentiousness of the term and the continuing debate over how exactly this "living together" worked in daily practice, but adds that "for this writer, these debates are a tiresome and troublesome waste of life, a kind of conceptual tar pit" (p. 354, n. 188). The really interesting question, in his mind, is what was achieved artistically in the period. Presumably, then, he would also have little or no interest in a historiographical paper like this.

⁷ Maya Soifer, "Beyond *Convivencia*: Critical Reflections on the Historiography of Interfaith Relations in Christian Spain," *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 31.

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Castro is generally seen as the father of *convivencia*; Alex Novikoff, however, observes that Castro borrowed the term from the philologist Ramón Menéndez Pidal. See Alex Novikoff, "Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Spain: An Historiographic Enigma," *Medieval Encounters* 11, no. 1 (2005):

glance a deceptively simple word, translating roughly to “living together” and referring to the period of Spanish history—from the Muslim invasion of 711 to the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims in 1492—when those who professed Judaism, Christianity, and Islam inhabited the Iberian Peninsula. That simplicity, however, belies the complexity of the issue, and historians since Castro have used *convivencia* in a variety of ways to describe what that “living together” looked like and what its impact has been on Spanish identity. Castro envisioned the term as (in Soifer’s words) “an idealist construct that aspired to describe the mental processes taking place in the collective consciousness of the three cultures.”¹⁰ Subsequent historians, such as Thomas F. Glick, have reformulated it as a *social* construct, a means of describing the grand structure and evolutionary process of cultural change; others, like David Nirenberg, have applied it at the level of microhistory in an effort to explain the dynamics of interfaith relations “on the ground.” Still others, in the vein of Steven Nightingale, employ it as a concise descriptor of a near-utopian society that the modern world has been struggling ever since to regain. Indeed, the very flexibility and “limitless susceptibility to manipulation and reinvention” that Soifer decries¹¹ has contributed in large measure to the enduring appeal of the term; for it captures, without actually describing or explaining, the intriguing realities of cultural contact in medieval Spain.

This period of history has gripped non-Spanish imaginations at least since Washington Irving published his *Tales of the Alhambra* in 1832, but interest was revived for Hispanists during the unsettling era of Francisco Franco’s regime. The 20th century saw in Spain a nationalist crisis, as scholars attempted to reconcile the glories of a past empire with “the ‘enigma’ of modern Spain . . . hopelessly out of step with,” and

18 and 20 for a discussion of Pidal’s contributions to Spanish historiography and Castro’s revisionist response.

¹⁰ Soifer, “Beyond *Convivencia*,” 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

demonized by, “the rest of Europe.”¹² Spain labored not only under the weight of current political and economic troubles, but also under the “Black Legend” of inquisition and genocide that had dogged her since the 17th century—and which Nightingale has perhaps unwittingly restated. Perceived by Europe as backwards, persecutory, fanatic, Spain herself did not seem to know what to do with her history and current identity.

This deep anxiety and pessimism, mingled with a contradictory sense of nationalist pride, underlies the works of Américo Castro. His *España en su historia: cristianos, moros, y judios*, published in 1948, while Castro was in exile in the United States, was written as a corrective to popular views of Spanish history. It was not meant, however, merely as an effort to regain historical truths for their own sake, but as a wake-up call to the nation of Spain. “The greatest service that historiography can offer in these times, replete with threatening omens, is to nail down the reasons for our deficiencies, to comprehend how it is that as a people we were so grandiose in our past undertakings and are so uneasy, troubled, and failure-prone today.”¹³ This required an understanding of “how the inner habits of Spanish life have been formed”¹⁴—a goal Castro insists cannot be achieved using the “economicomaterialistic reasoning” of the then-popular *Annales* school of historians.¹⁵

¹² Kenneth Baxter Wolf, “Convivencia in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 73.

¹³ Américo Castro, “The Millennium Between ‘España’ and ‘Español,’” in *An Idea of History: Selected Essays of Americo Castro*, trans. and ed. Stephen Gilman and Edmund L. King (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 216.

¹⁴ Américo Castro, “The Spanish People,” in *An Idea of History: Selected Essays of Americo Castro*, trans. and ed. Stephen Gilman and Edmund L. King (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 190.

¹⁵ Américo Castro, *The Spaniards: An Introduction to Their History*, trans. Edmund L. King and Selma Margaretten (University of California Press, 1971), 3. Castro finds nothing good to say

Questions of economics and demographics fail to reach the heart of the issue, which for Castro is the forging of a collective identity; what is important in his history are thus not “numerical figures” but “acts of human will and volition,” not structures and environmental influences but the ways in which people conceived of themselves and then articulated those conceptions.¹⁶

Since “language makes history comprehensible” and is “a way of expressing and interpreting life,” Castro turns to his own area of expertise, philology, to elucidate this question of identity-formation.¹⁷ Himself a literary critic (with an especial focus on Cervantes), he focuses on works “expressive of collective life”¹⁸—classics such as the *Poem of the Cid*, whose structures and vocabularies reveal much about the social milieu in which they were written. What they revealed to Castro was the absurdity of the traditional view held by Hispanists, who believed in an innate, eternal “Spanishness” running through all of Iberian history and who conflated modern Spanish identity with that of the peninsula’s oldest inhabitants.¹⁹ In Castro’s

of the *Annales*, whom he sees as materialistic and dangerously dismissive of the human side of life. He is especially critical of Fernand Braudel, whose *The Mediterranean* “confers the function of actors in human history on natural elements and population statistics” (7). Castro is vitally concerned with recovering the status of human agency in history, although he admits acerbically that he “sounds anachronistic and reactionary today” (6).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁹ “The Spaniard,” Castro observes sarcastically, “considers himself virtually an emanation from the soil of the Iberian Peninsula, or at least a being as ancient as the prehistoric Peninsular cave dwellers. . . . Thus the Spanishness of the prehistoric inhabitants in the mountainous regions of the Province of Santander continues uninterrupted in the people who make cheese in the grottos of Cabrales”; *ibid.*, 20.

view this myth is debunked through even a cursory study of the word “*españa*” itself, which was not adopted by the inhabitants of what we now call Spain until the late-13th century; prior to this, there was no unified Spanish identity, only local affiliations and the common bond of being Christian.²⁰ To apply the term “Spaniard” prior to the Muslim invasion of 711 was to him a painful anachronism, for that identity was produced only by the *convivencia*, the long period of “living together” following the arrival of the Moors.²¹ “The Spanish people came into being,” Castro insists, “in a process starting in the eighth century and continuing through the Muslim invasion, as a conglomeration of three castes of believers—Christians, Moors, and Jews.”²²

This *convivencia*, as Castro saw it, was not a utopia but a tolerance brought about by circumstances: in the long process of *Reconquista*, the Catholic states of Spain were required to keep themselves in constant readiness for war either with each other or with the Muslims, and thus had no time for scholarly achievements. It was necessary, then, for rulers like Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile (1040-1109) and Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284) to adopt what Castro considers the uniquely *Islamic* practice of religious toleration, enabling them to take advantage of the intellectual and administrative skills provided by non-Christian subjects.²³ This tolerance, however, was the

²⁰ Américo Castro, “The Millennium Between ‘España’ and ‘Español,’” 206.

²¹ Castro, “The Spanish People,” 191.

²² *Ibid.*, 188.

²³ Of the cultural efflorescence during the reign of Alfonso X “The Learned,” for example, Castro writes, “Arabic sciences and technical knowledge were imported by the Castilian Christian because of their practical and artistic efficacy. . . . The Jew served as an intermediary between the Moor and the Christian in many ways, and through him the Castilian of the dominant caste was able to become master of his lands, conqueror of the Moor, and

result of necessity. Once the “Hispano-Christian” grew in power and no longer required the cooperation of the other two “castes,” his obsession with religious purity and his will to dominate drove him to expel them from the peninsula.²⁴ From this act Castro traced the story of Spain’s artistic and intellectual decline, perpetuated by historians who ignored the Jewish and Muslim influence upon Spanish identity and continued to cultivate the myth of the “eternal Spaniard.”

One such historian, from Castro’s perspective, was Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, who wrote his 1956 *España: un enigma histórico* in response to Castro’s thesis. He did not deny, of course, that Muslims and Jews had lived alongside Christians in medieval Spain; what he did reject was the idea that non-Christian cultures had had a formative role in the creation of Spanish identity. In his view, there was a fundamental Spanish identity that could not be essentially altered by contact with other cultures; and this identity could be seen, not in the supposed tolerance of *convivencia*, but in the “passion . . . for divine war” that moved the common people to acts of violence against Jews and Muslims.²⁵ *Convivencia* was a state of existence imposed upon society by the elite, but it was fundamentally at odds with the eternal Spanish character that valued religious unity above all.²⁶

If Sánchez-Albornoz’s critique of *convivencia* has ultimately endured, Castro nevertheless got the better of the debate in the short term. His position was more or less recapitulated in

eventually executor of the Hispano-Hebrew prophecies of imperial dominion of the world.” Castro, *The Spaniards*, 539.

²⁴ Castro, “The Spanish People,” 197.

²⁵ Novikoff, “Between Tolerance and Intolerance,” 23. Sánchez-Albornoz’s work, unlike Castro’s, has not been well translated into English (a fact which itself speaks volumes regarding the outcome of the debate); comments on his *España* in the present essay must therefore draw upon other historiographical articles, such as Novikoff’s.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

1985 by J. N. Hillgarth, whose “Spanish Historiography and Iberian Reality” investigates the “power of certain myths” in Hispanist literature.²⁷ One such myth sprang from the pen of Isidore of Seville, who envisioned the Goths as the people chosen by God to rule over Spain, and this myth has continued in various manifestations throughout Spanish history. Hillgarth believed that the Isidorian myth powerfully motivated Ferdinand and Isabella’s efforts to unite the peninsula under their own Catholic banner when it was revived in the 15th century,²⁸ and he saw it breathing still in the 20th-century writings of “eternal Spain” historians like Sánchez-Albornoz. Américo Castro, too, was “inspired by a myth,” one that “can be summed up in the word he often uses, *convivencia*.”²⁹ Yet Hillgarth found Castro’s myth more fruitful, less untrue, than that of Sánchez-Albornoz. For “despite many outbreaks of intolerance . . . Christians, Jews, and Muslims did coexist for centuries in Spain—unlike the rest of Western Europe,”³⁰ and in the late 15th century Spain, “which had rested on the support of three religions, was thrown out of balance by the removal or denial of two of the three.”³¹ *Convivencia* thus remained to Hillgarth what it was to Castro: an idealist concept, a “myth” or construct of a people’s identity, important in its oppositional nature to the myth of an eternal Spain.

By the time Hillgarth wrote, however, historians were already “engaged in correcting Castro’s mistakes”³² and, in the

²⁷ J. N. Hillgarth, “Spanish Historiography and Iberian Reality,” *History and Theory* 24, no. 1 (1985): 23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³² *Ibid.*, 33. Hillgarth, while obviously favoring Castro, nevertheless admits here that Castro “sometimes forced [the consequences of cultural contact] further than the evidence allowed.” Thus, Hillgarth seems to have generally approved of the corrective work of colleagues like Glick—although he takes issue with what

process, substantially reinterpreting *convivencia*. The most influential scholar in this pursuit was Thomas F. Glick, whose 1969 article “Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept in Spanish History” (with anthropologist Oriol Pi-Sunyer) and 1979 monograph *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* introduced a sociological perspective to the study of the *convivencia*. Alex Novikoff aptly sums up Glick’s perspective as “‘post-Castro and post-Sánchez-Albornoz,’ that is, steering clear of the quest for national origins.”³³ Indeed, in the last half of the 20th century, the fascination with such quests was becoming less popular as the very definition of a “nation” was heavily revised. Whereas Castro could speak of a “progressive formation of the [Spanish] WE,” traceable “in documents, oral literature, or works of art as it attains its collective plenitude,”³⁴ by the 1970s-80s theorists were dismissing such philological foundations of nationalism out of hand: “Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth,” Ernest Gellner stated definitively in 1983. “What do exist are cultures, often subtly grouped, shading into each other, overlapping, intertwined.”³⁵ Similarly, Glick expressed disappointment with both Castro and Sánchez-Albornoz for fixating on “the issue of modal personality.”³⁶ Proclaiming the debate officially over—since “however one may approach it, the central phenomenon of medieval Spain . . . is the meeting and bilateral adjustment of

he sees as Glick’s heavy-handed critique of *convivencia* (see *ibid.*, 34).

³³ Novikoff, “Between Tolerance and Intolerance,” 30.

³⁴ Américo Castro, “The Historical ‘WE,’” in *An Idea of History: Selected Essays of Americo Castro*, trans. and ed. Stephen Gilman and Edmund L. King (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 320.

³⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 48-49.

³⁶ Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 10.

two distinct cultures, Christian and Muslim”³⁷—Glick encouraged his compatriots to step outside its constraints. *Convivencia*, he and Pi-Sunyer argued in 1969, was a (necessary) statement of the obvious; what it had not yet been able to achieve was the “delineation of a *structure*” of social change. If such an overarching model was to be developed, “then the mechanisms and conditions of cultural diffusion must be described systematically and classified” by sociological historians.³⁸

Glick and Pi-Sunyer’s article was primarily theoretical, but Glick followed his own recommendation in his 1979 monograph *Islamic and Christian Spain*, adopting a comparative approach in an attempt to explain, on the macro level, the processes by which Christian and the Islamic societies shaped one another in the period of *convivencia*. Glick’s book reveals little interest in the effects of “living together” on the consciousness of the modern Spaniard: Glick sees this as a narrow, idealist way of understanding *convivencia*, one which failed to grapple with the effect of historical variables like “power, wealth, numbers, or technology” on cultural contact and adaptation.³⁹ Instead, the work examines Christian and Muslim societies as two “blocs” with “different cultures . . . [and] different socio-economic systems” that gave them their distinctive structures. Implicit in this understanding of Spanish history is an ironic reversal of Castro’s self-professed “humanism”: where Castro finds the core of society in its literature and art, Glick finds it in the society’s economic structure—whether “urban-artisanal,” as he characterizes the Islamic society, or “static-agrarian,” as he terms the Christian.⁴⁰

³⁷ Thomas F. Glick and Oriol Pi-Sunyer, “Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept in Spanish History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11, no. 2 (1969): 138.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁹ Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 296.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6. Castro would presumably have had the same negative assessment of Glick as he had of Braudel (cf. Castro, *The*

Unburdened by the weight of nationalist polemic, and apparently unconcerned with what medieval art reveals about constructions of identity, Glick approaches Iberian history with precisely the goal he and Pi-Sunyer outlined in 1969: delineating a structure of social evolution, a model that could be applied beyond the spatial and temporal borders of medieval Spain.⁴¹ Beginning the work with a section on “Society and Economy,” which forms the bulk of the book and includes discussions of Mediterranean trade networks, ecology, agriculture, settlement patterns, kinship structures, and feudalism, he moves on to a meticulously divided assessment of cultural diffusion: of technology, of science, of language. Interestingly, however, and despite the increased accessibility of local archives following the collapse of the Franco regime,⁴² Glick’s work is less an original examination of primary sources than it is a tremendous effort at synthesizing the many focused articles and sweeping histories already available. He marries topical studies on (to choose a few examples at random) watermills, mutton-eating, and the cultivation of cereals with broader, more theoretical works, including Marc Bloch’s *Feudal Society*, Maurice Lombard and Harold Livermore’s structuralist histories of Spain, and, yes, Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean*. Castro may have eschewed such a materialistic focus; but in Glick’s view, as he argued in his 1969 article, only through this “total history” approach “will the true structure of Spanish history”—and the true dynamics of *convivencia*—“be discernible in full relief.”⁴³

Spaniards, 6); perhaps fortunately for Glick, however, Castro died in 1972, seven years before the publication of *Islamic and Christian Spain*, and thus did not have the opportunity of reviewing it.

⁴¹ Glick and Pi-Sunyer, “Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept,” 138.

⁴² Novikoff, “Between Tolerance and Intolerance,” 28.

⁴³ Glick and Pi-Sunyer, “Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept,” 154.

Glick himself was critical of Castro's term, seeing it as a "catch-all mechanism used to explain all phenomena of cultural change contingent upon the contact of cultures, an inclusivity which obscures what are in reality a number of different mechanisms"⁴⁴; for his own purposes he preferred to use the term "acculturation," which, while also a catch-all mechanism, implies a range of contact-dynamics and has no inherent link to medieval Spain as a unique phenomenon.⁴⁵ Given his ambivalence, it is perhaps ironic that his revivification of *convivencia* should have had such profound influence on historiography. From the 1960s to the 1990s in particular, social historians such as Robert I. Burns and John Boswell applied his acculturative model to the burgeoning field of "Mudéjar studies," which examined the structure and evolution of Muslim societies under Catholic rule.⁴⁶

His substantial contributions to future bibliographies attest to Burns' particular influence in this field. Like Glick, his work

⁴⁴ Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 281. However, he seems to have warmed to the term or at least come to accept it by 1992, writing, "*Convivencia* survives. What we add to it is the admission that cultural interaction inevitably reflects a concrete and very complex social dynamic. What we retain of it is the understanding that acculturation implies a process of internalization of the 'other' that is the mechanism by which we make foreign cultural traits our own." Thomas F. Glick, "Convivencia: An Introductory Note," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, ed. Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick, and Jerrilynn D. Dodds (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1992), 7.

⁴⁵ Glick and Pi-Sunyer, "Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept," 138.

⁴⁶ The term *Mudéjar* (roughly, "those who stayed") began to be used by scholars around the turn of the 20th century to refer to those Muslims who remained in Iberia after the Reconquest but who did not convert to Christianity. *Morisco*, by contrast, refers to Muslims who converted to Christianity following Ferdinand and Isabella's 1492 ultimatum: convert or leave.

on the late-13th-century crusader society of Valencia was the product of his interest in “structural ethnology” (he held a doctorate in anthropology as well as in medieval history⁴⁷), but it also owed much to the Frontier Thesis that had been put forward by Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Much like Castro’s articulation of *convivencia* itself, Turner’s central argument—that American exceptionalism was the product of “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward”⁴⁸—was largely rejected by subsequent historians even while they “salvaged elements from the Thesis, rearranged in novel forms.”⁴⁹ One of these new forms was the concept of the frontier not as unique to North America, but in fact ubiquitous in Western history: in 1958, for instance, Archibald R. Lewis argued that “few periods can be better understood in the light of a frontier concept than western Europe between 800 and 1500 A.D.” and urged historians to investigate these centuries “in the light of a frontier thesis.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lawrence J. McCrank, “R. I. Burns as Ethnologist and Historian of the Old World and the New,” in *Iberia and the Mediterranean World of the Middle Ages*, ed. P. Chevedden, D. Kagay, and P. Padilla (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1996), 2:20.

⁴⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” (American Historical Association, 1894; Reprint, Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2014), 3.

⁴⁹ Burns himself, while rejecting the core of the thesis and admitting that Turner himself would be unlikely to recognize its various adaptations, nonetheless paid homage to it—not least in the title of his influential essay “The Significance of the Frontier in the Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Frontier Societies*, ed. Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); quote at 309.

⁵⁰ Archibald R. Lewis, “The Closing of the Medieval Frontier, 1250-1350,” *Speculum* 33, no. 4 (1958): 475.

It was this “neo-Turnerian” conception, along with a re-definition of the frontier not as “free land” waiting to be claimed by whites but as “zones of intercultural contact,” that Burns drew upon in his own research.⁵¹ “The analogy of the colonial experience itself with those of the sixteenth and later centuries is clear,” he states in his 1984 magnum opus, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia*: “the seizure and control by a dominant alien minority, supported from the homeland, growing by steady immigration, disdainful and wary of the native population.”⁵² In numerous essays, and with extensive research into the “marvelous and varied registers” of the conquering monarchs,⁵³ Burns investigates the impact of these colonizers upon the social structure of the colonized in terms less of *convivencia* than of acculturation. When Muslim society survived in Valencia, it was not because of enlightenment on the part of the Catholic conquerors; it was because of the resilience of the Muslim culture and its ability to “recrystallize” after the shock of contact.⁵⁴ The coexistence and cooperation of Muslims, Jews, and Christians to which the archives attest “was not,” Burns stresses, “tolerance. Neither people would have conceded that our modern tolerance was a virtue; neither could have sympa-

⁵¹ Burns, “The Significance of the Frontier,” 310.

⁵² Robert I. Burns, SJ, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: Societies in Symbiosis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), xviii.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, xv. Burns acknowledges that cross-cultural interactions were not written about directly; historians must come at the question through the “patient archeological probing” of official documents, which “tend to stress legal disabilities, tax collections, administrative interventions, religious tension, the *chronique scandaleuse* of the police blotter, and clashes at arms” (12). In *Muslims, Christians, and Jews* these records include surrender documents, edicts and charters, and lawsuits—particularly those related to land ownership and boundary disputes (see 237-238).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

thized with our secular-humanistic principles. But it was a *modus vivendi*, an experience not without its human warmth and practical respect for irreconcilable difference. And it provided an effective ground for unremitting cultural interchange.”⁵⁵

Nor was Burns the only one to argue that questions of tolerance and intolerance, exclusion or *convivencia* were the wrong ones to ask. In his influential 1977 work *The Royal Treasure*, John Boswell also approached the case of Muslims living under the Crown of Aragon through the untapped riches of royal archives. His focus, however, was on the mid-14th century, and in his introduction Boswell defined his approach vis-à-vis an earlier work by Burns:

His study [*Islam under the Crusaders* (1974)] is, therefore, one of a society just beginning to establish its internal organization; indeed, what primarily interests Fr. Burns is the mechanisms and dynamics of the *establishment* of Christian hegemony over a Muslim population. The following study, on the other hand, is an effort to examine the position of Muslims once this hegemony was securely in place, i.e., what life was like for an established dissident minority.⁵⁶

Using royal letters, tax records, legal cases, and laws, Boswell sought to elucidate the “symbiosis” that existed between the Catholic monarchs of Aragon and their *mudéjar* subjects, and thus to “reconstruct” the “broken and crumpled spider’s web” of *convivencia*.⁵⁷

In Boswell’s view, however, it was critical that students of Spanish history not swing to extremes either of oppression or social harmony when considering this symbiotic relationship.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁶ John Boswell, *The Royal Treasure: Muslim Communities under the Crown of Aragon in the Fourteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1977), 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

The case of the *mudéjar* was full of “paradoxes”⁵⁸ and “contradictions” that could not be understood by naively asking “whether Muslims were ‘well’ or ‘ill’ treated or whether the Christians of Aragon-Catalonia-Valencia were ‘kind’ or ‘cruel,’ ‘tolerant’ or ‘intolerant.’”⁵⁹ Rather, an exploration of shifting royal policies from monarch to monarch revealed that the *mudéjars’* situation as a minority and their integration into the larger society were contingent upon such “historical factors” as war, finance, demographics, and the whim of the ruling class, and differed from region to region.⁶⁰ In Aragon, for instance, a long period of acculturation and a small *mudéjar* population may have allowed for a certain degree of “*convivencia* based on mutual acceptance and supra-ethnic loyalty.”⁶¹ By contrast, “co-existence between the ethnic groups in Valencia was simply that: co-existence.”⁶² The differences boiled down to socio-historical factors:

In no case could it be argued that the general situation of Muslims, whether desirable or undesirable, was due to the bigotry or tolerance of particular Christians, or to the enlightenment or fanaticism of the ruling classes, or to the justice or injustice of Christian authorities. The situation of the Muslims and their relation to Christian society around them was created and maintained by organizational and structural forces which operate on most pluralistic societies, which respond to stress by exaggerating social distinctions and cleavages regardless of the desires or wishes of individuals involved, and which are better analyzed in terms of their effects than their moral desirability.⁶³

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 405.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 398-399.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 400.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 407.

The top-down, institutional version of *convivencia*, stemming more from Glick's anthropological approach than from Castro's idealist conception of the term, continued to be the dominant historiographical perspective through the duration of the 20th century. Concurrently with Burns and Boswell, Elena Lourie published numerous essays on the situations of both Muslim and Jewish minorities in Aragon, including several that were reprinted in her 1990 collection *Crusade and Colonisation: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Aragon*. The compendium also featured an original piece that examined the sometimes-contradictory, always-ambivalent attitude of the Aragonese monarchs toward their *mudéjar* population, which at once protected Muslims as an economically beneficial minority and excluded them from the Christian "*communitas regni*."⁶⁴ Like Burns, Lourie examined royal policy in newly conquered territories like Majorca and Valencia, looking in particular at the range of fiscal demands, from ransom payments to tax burdens, made of the Muslims; and like Boswell, she stressed the paradoxes of this supposed *convivencia* in which Muslims were distrusted by the Crown and hated by the populace, yet also sought after as colonists and granted royal protection.⁶⁵

Also in the early 1990s, Mark Meyerson published his contribution to this popular field. *The Muslims of Valencia in the Age of Fernando and Isabel: Between Coexistence and Crusade* returns to the Crown of Aragon in the waning years of *convivencia* as if to complete the trilogy begun by Burns and Boswell, this time in an effort "to comprehend more fully the reasons for the breakdown of *convivencia*, which for the most part occurred under the Catholic monarchs, Fernando and his

⁶⁴ Elena Lourie, "Anatomy of Ambivalence: Muslims under the Crown of Aragon in the Late Thirteenth Century," in *Crusade and Colonisation: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Aragon*, ed. Elena Lourie (Hampshire, UK: Variorum, 1990), 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

wife, Isabel I of Castile.”⁶⁶ Again, however, he cautions against a too rosy view of Spain prior to the rise of these remarkable rulers: “In both Islamic and Christian societies there existed a form of institutionalized tolerance of religious minorities. Yet because this tolerance was institutional, an artificial governmental creation, it by no means guaranteed a harmonious intermingling of religious groups.”⁶⁷ Indeed, he challenges the dichotomy inherent in his own title by pointing out the “latent ideological antagonism” embedded in the “institutional forms structuring Iberian Christian-Muslim-Jewish coexistence”—the crusade ideology in the midst of coexistence, and the coexistence in the midst of crusade.⁶⁸

Like Lourie, Meyerson sees the foundation of this tenuous “living together” as essentially economic, since all layers of Valencian society depended on the labor and taxes of these religious others. “The Mudejars could not be extracted [from the economy] without the entire edifice crumbling,” he writes. “The fortunes of nobleman, cleric, and burgher were all linked, some more directly than others, to the Mudejars’ fate,” and for this reason the elite tended to resist any suggestion that Muslims should be forced to convert or flee.⁶⁹ Indeed, during the early part of his reign Ferdinand himself tended to follow in the footsteps of his “ambivalent” predecessors, being less concerned with the religious purity of the land than with ensuring “that the Crown received as great a share as was possible of the economic benefits accruing from the Mudejars’ labor and enterprise.”⁷⁰ Where Meyerson diverges from Lourie is on her

⁶⁶ Mark D. Meyerson, *The Muslims of Valencia in the Age of Fernando and Isabel: Between Coexistence and Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); e-book version distributed by Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

sharp dichotomy between the attitude of the rulers toward the Muslims and that of their Christian subjects. Armed with documents from the Archivo del Reino de Valencia that allow him to “explore some areas . . . that have been left largely untouched by scholars working in earlier centuries,”⁷¹ he shifts the historical perspective downward to the host of mundane economic transactions that took place outside the parameters of official decree. In light of such data, he argues that, on the contrary, “the popular Christian view of the Mudejars did not differ substantially from that of the king.”⁷² Christians patronized Muslim shops (the practice of purchasing meat from Muslim butchers became particularly contentious⁷³), and vice versa; Muslim artisans bought materials from Christian suppliers, and vice versa; Muslims established credit with Christians, and vice versa.

Just as economic considerations dictated royal policies, then, so in daily life the activities of buying and selling provided the counterweight to the religious exclusivism that might otherwise have brought latent antagonisms to the fore.⁷⁴ “It was above all the daily interaction between Muslim and Christian in the workplace and the marketplace,” Meyerson stresses, “that lent stability to Muslim-Christian *convivencia* in Valencia, and allowed for the breakdown of some, although by no means all, of the social barriers between them.”⁷⁵ Violence occasionally did break out due to “both religious hostility and economic resentment,” but so long as it was contained by the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷³ The manner in which animals were slaughtered had significant religious implications, so that by the late 15th century laws were being passed forbidding Christians from purchasing meat from either Muslim or Jewish butchers. The practice was apparently ongoing, however, and continued to plague Ferdinand and the Inquisition. See *ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

institutions set in place by Lourie's ambivalent monarchs, "*convivencia* was able to persist, much as it always had, with a potentiality for ethnic violence."⁷⁶ Isolated incidents of persecutions, however brutal, need not have spelled the end.

These incidents take front and center stage in David Nirenberg's 1996 *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, a work which draws upon the pioneering scholarship of Natalie Zemon Davis in its fusion of social and cultural history. Despite his subtitle, which reviewers have criticized as misleadingly broad,⁷⁷ Nirenberg focuses on the dynamics of "systemic" violence in southern France and Aragon: anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish crusades in 1320-1321; ritual "Holy Week" attacks on Jewish communities by their Christian neighbors; charges of miscegenation levelled against one group by another. His approach, however, is markedly different from the tradition of Mudéjar scholarship: rather than asking questions regarding cultural diffusion, the evolution of social structures, or even the "experiences" of minorities, he comes to local and royal archives in order to explore the "functions and meanings of . . . violence within medieval societies."⁷⁸ Through this exploration, he questions a teleological understanding of cross-cultural interactions and relative tolerance or persecution, not only in Spain, but in medieval Europe at large. Societies like those in Aragon, he argues, did not degenerate from a state of interfaith harmony into bigotry and cataclysmic violence; on the contrary, not only eyewitness accounts of riots but also civic cases—in which minorities were

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Meyerson's review, in which he commends the book but questions the applicability of Nirenberg's conclusions to regions on the other side of the Pyrenees. Mark D. Meyerson, "Review: *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*," *Speculum* 74, no. 2 (1999): 467.

⁷⁸ David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 15.

habitually accused of such crimes as well-poisoning and miscegenation—reveal the fact that legal as well as physical violence was always embedded in society.

Nirenberg's argument does not seem far removed from the moderate stance of Burns or Meyerson, who stress that antagonisms were always present in the midst of *convivencia*; but whereas Meyerson focuses on the role of economic exchange in restraining that antagonism, Nirenberg contends that acts of violence themselves helped stabilize *convivencia*.⁷⁹ In his chapter on "The Two Faces of Sacred Violence," for instance, he makes the case that the ritual reenactment of Passion plays symbolically integrated Jews into Christian life at the same time that the ritual stoning of the *call* (the city's Jewish quarter) reinforced the boundaries between the two.⁸⁰ The rhythmic quality of these aggressive acts set the parameters within which coexistence could take place. "*Convivencia* was predicated upon violence," he unequivocally concludes; "it was not its peaceful antithesis."⁸¹

Nirenberg's work, with its focus on interpretation and meaning rather than large-scale social change or even small-scale minority experiences, represents one of the most dramatic reinterpretations of Castro's term to date. More than simply

⁷⁹ Nirenberg cites approvingly Meyerson's thesis of "the economic foundations of *convivencia*," but emphasizes (as Meyerson himself acknowledges) that "none of these [economic] relations need preclude violence or hatred." Rather, such social networks "enmeshed moments of violence and gave them meaning" (Ibid., 40).

⁸⁰ Ibid., 218. Lucy K. Pick makes a similar argument regarding the use of polemical literature in maintaining *convivencia* in her *Conflict and Coexistence: Archbishop Rodrigo and the Muslims and Jews of Medieval Spain* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004); in particular see page 3, where she cites Nirenberg and draws a parallel between physical violence and the verbal violence of religious polemics.

⁸¹ Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 245.

“scrap[ing] the varnish of romanticism off the old concept,” as Soifer has put it,⁸² his thesis harkens back to Sánchez-Albornoz’s more polemical critiques and throws the very applicability of the word *convivencia* into question. Nirenberg himself sees “no reason why *convivencia* need designate only harmonious coexistence” and thus is willing to retain the term, so long as it is divested of any romantic overtones: one need not throw out the baby with the bathwater, his work implies.⁸³

Soifer, however, is not the only recent historian to believe Nirenberg did not go far enough in his analysis: Brian Catlos repudiates *convivencia* altogether in his 2004 *The Victors and the Vanquished*. In some ways this work, which examines “the period in which *mudéjar* society was born and matured” in Catalonia and Aragon,⁸⁴ harkens back to Mudéjar studies; he nods to his illustrious predecessors and places himself in their “socio-anthropological tradition,”⁸⁵ adopting a macro-historical approach toward the adaptations of Muslim institutions—financial, ideological, and administrative—to the “trauma” of conquest.⁸⁶ If anything, his work is even more exhaustive in

⁸² Soifer, “Beyond *Convivencia*,” 22. Soifer is ultimately unimpressed with Nirenberg’s approach, arguing that it posits *convivencia* as a “balancing act” maintained by “an indeterminate mechanism that infuses social reality with just the right amount of antagonism and toleration, somehow keeping the whole system in check. What it does not even attempt to answer is where the hostility and the need for cooperation come from, and how the desirable balance is achieved” (23). This seems, however, to be an oversimplification of historians like Nirenberg or Meyerson, who are very much interested in the mechanisms whereby *convivencia* was maintained.

⁸³ Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 8.

⁸⁴ Brian A. Catlos, *The Victors and the Vanquished: Christians and Muslims of Catalonia and Aragon, 1050-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

analyzing law codes, court cases, and tax records in order to understand the degree to which Muslims were integrated into the conquering society. He acknowledges that “no such study of a minority community can be complete . . . without endeavoring to understand how individuals were affected,” and thus concludes his work with a series of six microhistories that focus on the dynamics of inter-cultural exchange at the local level. Yet these case studies—unlike Meyerson’s review of economic transactions or Nirenberg’s examination of ritual violence—are primarily administrative, and are in fact less concerned with the experience of individual *mudéjar* than with the relationship between the judicial systems of the conquerors and of the conquered.⁸⁷

This relationship, he concludes, could be relatively symbiotic despite its many tensions. He is reluctant, however, to call the symbiosis *convivencia*, a term he refers to in a more recent work as “flawed and nebulous”⁸⁸ and associates with a false and anachronistic belief in a tolerant Spain. In an almost verbatim endorsement of Burns’ thesis, he observes that “the liberties which [the *mudéjar*] enjoyed did not result from an impulse of ‘tolerance’ on the part of the count-kings—this is a concept which is hardly regarded as a virtue today and was certainly not in the thirteenth century.”⁸⁹ Rather, individual Christians and Muslims (and, by extension, Jews) must be understood as operating within a number of social spheres in addition to the religious, any of which could dictate the terms of social interaction at a given time—sometimes violent, some-

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 261. The first three case studies each focus on a particular litigation involving tax exemption or a land dispute; the last three deal with particular officials, Muslim or Christian, in order to elucidate the performance of local administrations.

⁸⁸ Brian A. Catlos, *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, c. 1050-1614* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 89.

⁸⁹ Catlos, *Victors and Vanquished*, 321.

times amicable.⁹⁰ At all times, however, this interaction was dependent upon numerous pragmatic factors. Catlos even coined a new word for it: *conveniencia* rather than the too idyllic *convivencia*.⁹¹

“Catlos,” Soifer notes with what might be approval and might be derision, “cuts through the Gordian knot of issues surrounding *convivencia* by rejecting it altogether.”⁹² Yet it appears that Catlos, in his effort to distance himself as much as possible from associations like Nightingale’s, has created with *conveniencia* a view of medieval Spain as problematic as that generated by *convivencia*. Where the latter may be accused of overstating ideology and thus minimizing the pragmatic calculations involved in coexistence, Catlos’ new term risks overstating pragmatics and dismissing altogether the ideological underpinnings for the practice of tolerance in the medieval

⁹⁰ Ibid., 389. A similar argument is put forward by Jonathan Ray, who argues that *convivencia* should be reassessed from the perspective of the minorities themselves (in Ray’s case, this minority is the Jews rather than the Muslims). Like Catlos, Ray contends that Jews possessed a multiplicity of identities that went beyond the religious and shaped their social lives. Thus, “rather than continue to discuss this [medieval Spanish] society in terms of religious communities, it might be more profitable to view it as a product of a variety of contending identities and social, cultural, and religious tensions that existed between the individual and a number of possible groups” (Jonathan Ray, “Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval *Convivencia*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 2 (2005): 13). Nevertheless, Ray sees this approach as returning *convivencia* to its roots and gives no indication of wishing to see the term jettisoned (1).

⁹¹ Catlos, *Victors and Vanquished*, 407. Catlos expands somewhat upon his own term in *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom*; see pages 521-522 in particular.

⁹² Soifer, “Beyond *Convivencia*,” 24.

period.⁹³ Hillgarth might call *conveniencia* a new myth, important in its critique of the more romantic notions associated with *convivencia*, but nonetheless incapable of presenting a full picture of the dynamics of medieval Spain.

And this is, perhaps, at the heart of the *convivencia* critique: it fails to capture historical reality. As conjured by Nightingale, with its burden of wonder and nostalgia for what another popular author has called “A Vanished World,”⁹⁴ it can even distort that reality. On the other hand, the responsibility for these distortions cannot all be laid, as Soifer seems inclined to lay them, at the door of *convivencia*, for scholars like Glick, Boswell, and Nirenberg attest to the fact that the “nuts-and-bolts explorations of interfaith existence” that she craves can be made without rejecting the term.⁹⁵ Rather, the misrepresentations spring from the complexities, ambiguities, and apparent contradictions of medieval Spanish society itself. Medieval Spain cannot be summed up in a single word, whether that word be *convivencia* or *conveniencia*, for each was present in

⁹³ Pragmatism may indeed have been the largest single factor in the case of Spain. Over the last several decades, however, there has been a historiographical reaction against the too rapid dismissal of “tolerance as a medieval virtue,” and there are many who would question Burns’, Boswell’s, or Catlos’ claims that to speak in terms of toleration is anachronistic. See, for instance, John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman (eds.), *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); also István Bejczy, “*Tolerantia: A Medieval Concept*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (1997): 365-84.

⁹⁴ Chris Lowney, *A Vanished World: Medieval Spain’s Golden Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Free Press, 2005). Lowney’s post-9/11 book is heavily influenced by contemporary issues, and is suffused, even more than Nightingale’s *Granada*, with a despairing nostalgia for the “common society” that medieval Spain almost attained (see p. 14).

⁹⁵ Soifer, “Beyond *Convivencia*,” 31.

different ways and at different times; popular and scholarly treatments of the era from Catlos to Nightingale are thus most problematic not when they employ a particular term, but when they attempt to use a single paradigm to the exclusion of all others. Novikoff, who refers to the debate as an “historiographical enigma” and seems uncertain what to make of it, nonetheless acknowledges this point: “The contrasting images one is presented with” in scholars’ reinterpretations of *convivencia* “are themselves evidence of a world more varied, more changing, and more complex than any overarching concept or generality can convey.”⁹⁶

Paradoxically, that has been the charm of *convivencia* since 1948. It suggests more than it tells, and its tantalizing suggestions have continually fueled research—by those who reject it as well as by those who accept it. What was *convivencia*? How was there coexistence? Was there tolerance, or is tolerance the wrong frame to use? What made Spain unique, or was Spain unique at all? What motivated the rulers, and what motivated the common folk in their daily life? Was society harmonious or conflictive, or are the two mutually exclusive? *Convivencia* has not stopped the questions being asked, nor has it hindered scholars from proposing thoughtful answers. If it is a myth, it nevertheless seems to be a more fruitful one than Soifer has given it credit for—Nightingale’s new book notwithstanding.

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