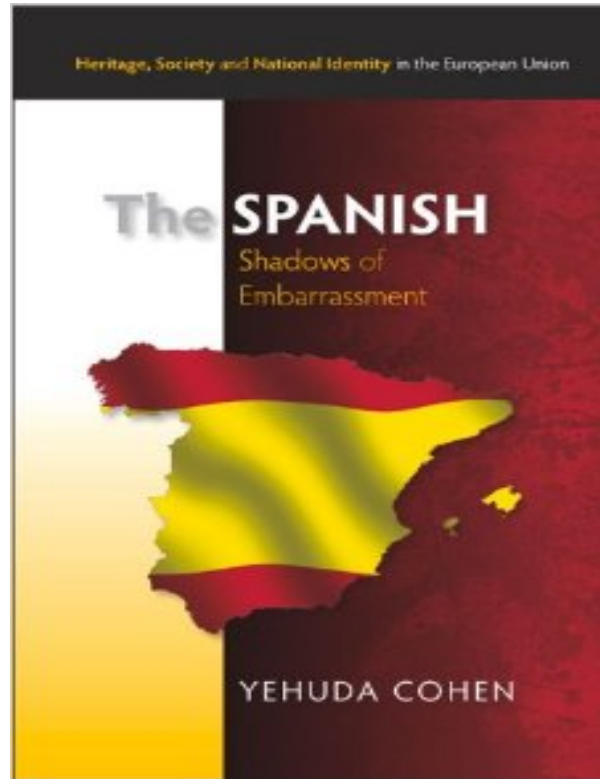


Yehuda Cohen. *The Spanish: Shadows of Embarrassment*. Brighton–Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-18-451938-8. XIV + 234 pgs.

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Yehuda Cohen’s dissertation, entitled *Heritage, Society and National Identity in the European Union*, is divided into six different volumes, each one dedicated to the most historically significant countries of Western Europe: Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, and Spain. In the volume that I shall review here, *The Spanish: Shadows of Embarrassment*, Cohen attempts to explore the patterns present throughout Spanish history. Primarily by tracing the origin of such motifs, the author’s main objective is to respond to what he considers the reason behind Spain’s slow-paced progression compared to other European Nations. In its introductory chapter, Cohen establishes that “the research at hand demonstrates that the primary force behind [*the Spanish*] downward spiral from the drive for empire and the loss of Empire was a rigid religious orthodoxy dictating political policy, against all logic” (17). Thus, this monograph will try to explain to what degree religiosity has always intermingled with the Spanish political agenda.

Following a chronological order, he takes the reader back to the beginning of this religiously driven political ideology that, in his opinion, has greatly affected the historical evolution and progress of Spain. Dissecting substantial historical events, the author amplifies more on the significance of the formation of early Spain, highlighting how the past has been confronted by two major views as centuries passed by: Spanish tradition against new emerging progressive ideas.

In the second chapter, entitled “The Visigothic Spirit: The Seeds of Intolerance” (19-22), Cohen discusses in depth the establishment of Visigoth Spain and how religious and political

ideologies of that time were connected to the *Reconquista* in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The author narrates that under the Visigoth rule, the Iberian Peninsula was unified for the first time without any foreign intervention and became one self-functioning entity, underscoring that “the Visigoths codified a new political system that made the crown dependent upon the clergy” (19). Since the government was built upon the Roman Catholic creed with the Church dictating policy, alongside the king’s will to implement such terms, these policies usually ended up disfavoring the Jewish community (21). It is important to note here that Cohen contributes to the understanding of the evident socio-economic importance of this religious group, as he underscores that this success would eventually unravel into a more violent resentment by the hands of the *Cristianos viejos*, or, as he states, “faith [to] overri[de] reason” (22).

In the “Golden Age” (23-29), term he uses to identify the political status of the Jews under Muslim Spain, Cohen states that during this period of time Spain flourished and reached a cultural, social, and political development more so than any other European territory. The author also elaborates the extent to which under the Muslim control of the Iberian Peninsula, there was relatively a higher level of tolerance compared to the Christian Spain of the Visigoths. However, it seems that Cohen tends to overly emphasize the Christian hostility against the Jews, as he diminishes certain Muslim governments well-known for their policies against other cults, such as that of the Almohads, whose legendary religious intolerance is superficially analyzed by the author (13-14).

For those researchers interested in the *Reconquista*, Cohen exposes his view about the process that consolidated the return to Christianity of Spain (30-46). Here too, the author provides a brief glance of social and cultural developments during the once-again Christian Spain to subsequently explicate the way in which the Jews suffered from a religious and political limbo (47-58). Highlighting, above all, that the conflict over the throne between Pedro I and his bastard brother, Enrique II, “brought a deterioration in the status of the Jews in the kingdom” (52); and that with the succession of the first Trastámara, “the first time anti-Semitism has been exploited for political ends” (52).

While Cohen’s main focus is on Spanish Medieval history, he ends this period with the reign of the Catholic Monarchs’ reign, the fall of the last Moorish entity in the Iberian Peninsula, and the expulsion of the Jews (59-88). According to the author’s judgment, the reign of Isabel and Fernando was characterized by religious fanaticism overriding economic power. In an economic sense, Cohen observes that the power attained by the Catholic Monarchs was used to get rid of the one minority that provided economic stability to the kingdom, the Jews, instead of being utilized for the improvement and well-being of Castile and Aragon. Therefore, according to the author’s opinion, the downfall was more than evident. It is important to note however that Cohen tends to overlook the fact that several Jews working for the Monarchs remained with the crown as they converted to Christianity, maintaining thus their political and socio-economic status. Considering this key factor, the polemical debate of the *conversos*, Cohen would have greatly benefited from recent studies that provide a more profound understanding of this minority during the last decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the entire Spanish Renaissance.

Cohen speeds up through the following centuries, after the fall of the Empire, maintaining constant religious fanaticism discourse and its effects on Spanish modern society. Hence, the author spends the last chapters of his book discussing the aftermath of centuries after the successful Spanish Empire (89-103). Cohen enriches this monograph by establishing the way in which the traditional orthodox mindset is seen as the way to bring together a country suffering from both social and political unrest. He makes the effort to uncover along these lines that the

Spain that once dominated most of the globe attempted to build itself back up following the same ideals that drove it to a complete splendor in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century (104-150). Yet, just as the author points out, these traditionalist principles collided with the emerging liberalist ideals. In the quest for learning to evolve, the struggle gave Spain small periods of democracy and improvement, followed right by longer periods of the same type of traditional authority (151-194).

To finish it all off, Cohen concludes this study with the evident social and cultural change after Franco's regime. With the liberty attained after suffering from a repressive government, Spain, according to the author, was able to come together in part by the collective desire of prosperity and improvement. And, with this noted aspiration from the author, the introduction of Spain in the European Union helped this country step aside from the persistent traditional framework into a more pluralistic society (195-203).

In sum, *The Spanish: Shadows of Embarrassment* provides a fruitful timeline of significant historical events. The author is able to deliver a brief taste of the different eras, and builds up his argument by identifying that the past has greatly affected the future of this nation; making this monograph an ambitious work with a great deal of material. Regardless of this quite remarkable approach that attempts to unveil the problematic behind Spain's controversial politics, when focusing on medieval and early modern periods, there are a few gray areas that could have enjoyed a far more detailed and diversified approximation. For instance, the assumptions made of medieval Moorish Spain versus Christian Spain, urged for a more impartial critique that fails to provide enough credit to the interaction of the tri-religious Spain. Still, in spite of these few discrepancies, this book should be taken into account not only by those interested in medieval history but also by researchers seeking an understanding of contemporary Spanish society.