

**"A VIGILANT SOCIETY. JEWISH THOUGHT AND
THE STATE IN MEDIEVAL SPAIN"**

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The present work¹ takes us back to life in the Iberian Peninsula during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in order to show us the origin of the "vigilant society" that lasts until our days. A triumphant society that inspires a particular vision of public life and can boast of having brought two very successful "franchises" into our times: universities, created in the heat of Christian cathedrals, and the State (p. xi).

This journey in time is done in a unique way. As the author warns in the Preface, it is not his intention to offer historical research or to construct a "historicist" account (p. x). The work, therefore, does not follow a strict chronological order. It is possible for the reader to be surprised that characters appear and disappear, that many ideas resonate several times in different places of the work, or that in the same pages the reflections of medieval authors are intertwined with those of contemporary or recent authors, without establishing a temporal hierarchy between them. However, these repetitions and jumps are not capricious. Rather, they should be interpreted as the ingenuous and creative freedom of an author that does not submit to the "law of identity" enshrined in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (p. ix), which rigidities and limitations are so harmful when reflecting on the government of the citizen. In granting this freedom, the author very well knows that he is going to write about a reality that affects the internal world of individuals, an inner world where "phenomena and their memories do not die out, nor are they manipulated in our conscience as orderly processions in time" (p. 232). This way of narrating, which is accompanied by an extraordinary attention in details, does not weaken the rigor or meaning of the story; on the contrary, it gives it a subtlety and a special expressive capacity with which it invites the reader to dwell in these pages, although in many cases, given the complexity of certain topics, its meaning is not obvious and its reading requires special effort and preparation. The conclusions drawn in the last chapter (chap. 7) emphasize that this book is talking about the world today (pp. 231-232), which invites us to

1 This work was first published in Spanish, see Roiz Javier, *Sociedad vigilante y mundo judío en la concepción del Estado*, Editorial Complutense, Asociación Foro Interno, Madrid, 2008. It is noteworthy to mention the good work done by Selma L. Margaretten in the English translation.

think that Roiz has succeeded in making a genuine *theoretical journey*².

Following in the footsteps of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) (pp. 13, 34), Roiz studies the figure and transcendence of Moses Maimonides (Rambam) (1135-1204), one of the most outstanding thinkers in the medieval Sephardic tradition. He dedicates him chapters 1 and 2, although his presence runs through the entire work. His reading calls into question the classical interpretations, mainly of Ashkenazi influence, that consider him a rationalist thinker heavily influenced by Aristotle. The deep study of the work of this Lucena (Córdoba) born thinker gives the author entrance to discover a rich world in the exact moment it's undergoing a transcendental transformation.

The scenario where Roiz places his research is marked by several fractures and tensions that overlap. On the one hand, the division between the Latin-speaking Europe and Greek-speaking Europe, Byzantium, where the tension is so palpable that it explodes in military clashes, the Crusades (p. 4). While on the other, the religious division between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the strongest tension was not the one that faced Jews against Muslims, but Jews against Christians. The main motive was the accusation weighed by Christians against the Jews of having murdered their prophet (p. 8).

During this time, the Greek world that had been lost and set apart by the Latin Christian world was still connected, however, with the Muslim and Jewish world of North Africa and the southern Iberian Peninsula (pp. 3-4). Thanks to this, Jewish and Muslim philosophers knew the works of Plato and Aristotle before Christians. Another indicator of this division was the fact that for the Latin world the Greek schools apparently ceased to exist with the "Cynics, Sceptics, or Epicureans", although these continued their activity well into the fifth century (p. 3).

Given these circumstances, the Jewish communities living on Muslim soil enjoyed a much friendlier and more refined environment than the Jewish communities living on Christian soil, which they describe crudely (pp. 10-11). In the case of Sephardic Jews, it was traumatic to have to live on Christian soil. As shown in the work, the military defeat of Islamic caliphate against the Christian kingdoms—two opposing empires that mark the European panorama of the moment—will make the Jewish communities more difficult to preserve their identity.

In any case, the author emphasizes that the Jewish communities lived embedded in the kingdoms that welcomed them as loyal subjects, adapted in great part to the uses and customs of the place. Their uniqueness lies in the fact that they are communities linked by their identity but lacking their own sovereignty, territory or army (pp. 16-17). This makes them more sensitive to the environment in which they live. With this said, there is also the constant risk of accepting *assimilation*—adopting the uses and customs of the place as their own—

2 About the concept, see Wolin Sheldon S., *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003, chap. 2.

or falling into *messianism* —seeking their own sovereignty. Both are possible defenses against the attacks that may force them to convert or flee (p. 2). The existence of the Diaspora raises another key feature of the fragmented scenario exposed in the book: the division between the Jewish worlds of Sepharad (the Iberian Peninsula) and Ashkenaz (northern France, territory on the Rhine and Elbe and part of Poland) (pp. 109, 181-186).

The connection and the exchanges that existed between the two areas thanks to a common language allow the author to speak of a dynamic process of "cross-pollination" (p. ix). The course of these exchanges gives an account of the extent to which these communities were able to maintain their own ways of governing collective life or whether they fully assumed the thriving philosophy of the Christian kingdoms in which they lived. The Disputation of Barcelona (1263) described in chapter 3, "The Gothic World Comes to the South", a central chapter of the work, is a transcendental landmark of this story. It points to the approach of the Sephardic Jewish communities towards the Christian-Gothic vision of the government that had already been accepted by the Ashkenazi communities and, with it, the abandonment of Maimonides' philosophy. As shown in the comparison between Nahmanides (Ramban) (1194-1270) and Maimonides (chap. 3, pp. 91ff.), as well as in the analysis of Kabbalah (chap. 4) and the *Zohar* (chap. 5), these alterations have many nuances. They are not drastic or instantaneous changes. Possibly because they affect the harmonies of thought, not just melodies³. In his analysis, the author emphasizes how the Mediterranean substrate still marks certain differences with the Ashkenazi world when engaging in the works of the Sephardic School of rabbis in Gerona, Moses de León (c. 1240-1305) or Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) (pp. 123-124, 158-159, 187). Similarly, he also remarks the striking closeness between Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) — of Ashkenazic origin— and the thought of Maimonides (pp. 14-15).

The characteristics of the *vigilant society* set forth in the last chapter, offers a list of axioms that the authors of this tradition assume as the basis of their political theory (p. 229); these are delicately unraveled throughout the book by the conception of the public long held in the Sephardic world. It is very valuable to discover another vision of the public that then and now contrasts with the version offered by the vigilant society and that, in the opinion of the author, can bring new democratic content to our way of governing. Not in vain, the purpose of this book is to recover "lost objects" from our democratic tradition (pp. xii-xiii).

In this sense, *A Vigilant Society* is deeply linked to the work that precedes it⁴. In it, Roiz had observed that in the rhetorical tradition of Isocrates (436-338 BCE), Cicero (106-43 BCE), Quintilian (35-100 CE), or Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), public life had been considered to be composed of two inseparable facets, "inherence" and "contingency". Due to this, the resulting tradition of thought un-

3 On the difference between "harmony" and "melody" see p. 20.

4 Roiz Javier, *La recuperación del buen juicio: Teoría política en el siglo XX*, Foro Interno, Madrid, 2003.

derstands the deep importance of *good judgment* and assumes that the citizen requires special preparation to be able to coexist with others, granting each citizen the *isegory* that Aristotle would have enjoyed in Athens —although some of its followers forget it, as Roiz points out (p. 33). Appreciating contingency and the good judgment linked to it, which requires interpreting the law in concrete circumstances and attending to the affections and intelligence of the people involved, the previously studied rhetorical tradition connects with Sephardic thinking and practices in the life of the *aljamas*. The imposition of another vision in which executive leadership imposes itself on the importance of interpretation and consensus stands out as a key indicator of the rise of vigilant society.

Connected to the care of contingency is the *care of the body* as something that must precede the care of the soul. It is something to which the author gives much importance. Roiz interprets this conviction of Maimonides —who was a doctor— as recognition of our limitations and finitude as the basis from which to think of government (pp. 52-53). What is at stake at this point is nothing less than the way we face *omnipotence*. A problem that the romantic ideologies have not been able to digest and hence their constant temptation to attend to the vital anguish through the application of a “*final solution*” (p. 2).

The work uses many pairs of concepts, which are original ingredients of the author’s thought⁵ and serve to analyze and contrast the different visions of the public: inherent and contingent, dialectic and rhetoric, vigilance and lethargy, sight and hearing, harmony and melody, red memory and green memory, internal forum and external forum... These pairings could lead us to consider that these are dialectical dichotomies, which would serve to limit mental territories as a cartographer would draw boundaries on a map. This could be somewhat paradoxical given the criticism of the dialectical thought that is realized. However, the reader soon perceives that, although they are concepts easy to remember and allow a first approximation to the subject (which is an advantage from a didactic point of view), then they open the reader a subtle and nuanced world that is only understood musically, accepting that the author’s voices overlap and express themselves without control of his will. A very characteristic example of this way of writing is his description of the “*enchantment*” of *Don Quixote* and its comparison with the enchantment produced by the *Zohar* (pp. 157-158). The result of all this is the description of non-defined (in the dialectical mode) thinking frames, but that are still very recognizable. A daring way of working that does not shy away from life or succumb to the false neatness that comes with that “*sterilization of thought*” (p. 44) that the author associates with Calvinist science. It should be noted that this style requires an attentive, prepared and generous reader.

This book will interest specialists in the study of Sephardic and medieval

5 For further development of the author’s thought, see Roiz Javier, *El experimento moderno: Política y Psicología al final del siglo XX*, Trotta, Madrid, 1996; and *El mundo interno y la política*, Plaza y Valdes, Madrid-México, 2013.

Christian thought. But it is also of particular interest to those who from political theory meditate on the future of the State and democracy. It is a very knowledgeable and original contribution to understand some of the basic ingredients that have intervened in the formation of the State and have gone unnoticed. The treatment of concepts as novel as the rule of our lives, the distinction between internal forum and external forum and the claim of lethargy as a benign component of our citizenship are some of the pearls rescued by the author that can be very fertile to others thinkers. Without a doubt, this is a work written from Sepharad that adds to the tradition of Maimonides, for whom science has the dual purpose of seeking truth (*emet*) and peace (*shalom*) (p. 41).

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