Legal Pluralism and Racial Politics in Early Modern Iberian Empires.

In studying the societies of the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern era, the question arises of the incompatibility between, on the one hand, Saint Paul’s message (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians [3-28]”), and rules of segregation founded upon an assertion of natural inferiority and the inability of people to change, on the other. The most salient case in Early Modern Europe was the fate of the descendants of converts in Iberian societies, branches of families that had been Jewish or Muslim, before those faiths were outlawed. The conversion created a situation in which families that had previously been denied all access to statuses, offices, and advantages reserved for Christians alone, could integrate into society as converts. The success of this transformation, however, provoked a counter-reaction from the social majority. This took the form of institutions of various kinds—universities, schools, religious and military orders, brotherhoods, courts, municipalities, etc—adopting statutes of blood purity. The purpose of these rules was to deny access to Christians descended from converted Jews or Muslims, no matter how far back the conversion of their ancestors. Such a series of rules provided a framework to face the social complexity of colonial societies in the Iberian colonies as well.

The blood purity statutes, categorized and excluded individuals a priori upon the basis of their genealogy alone. And they did so independent of any investigation into the moral and religious convictions of the descendants of converts, as they were not designed to judge the sincerity of conversions. A systemic suspicion of the spiritual reality of all conversions, and of all neophyte baptisms, lay behind these statutes, in the Iberian Peninsula and in the colonies. As local and particular as they may have been, these blood purity statutes were no less built upon a theory that was, from the perspective of Roman Catholic dogma, heresy. These measures entered into ideological contradiction with the religious framework in which they inscribed themselves and which they claimed to serve better than any other rule. This contradiction would seem to correspond to the thesis defended by a number of historians, in Portugal, Spain and Latin America, according to which many descendants of converts were in practice able to integrate the bodies and institutions that were in principle forbidden to them. In other words, these statutes would have been contestable in theory and circumvented in practice. The same can be said a propos the situation of some high ranked Native Americans, the Afro-American slaves brotherhoods, the inclusion of mestizos and mulattos into defense militia, etc.

The aim of the seminar is to address a central question for the history of Iberian societies and polities: were racial categories available resources in order to shape social and political rules in these countries and territories from the Late Middle Ages and the early colonial expansion? Against dominant interpretations in the history of racism, I pretend to demonstrate that both the Spanish and the Portuguese monarchies took advantage of the existence of racial categories and rules in their management of social and political authority, much before the birth of global racial theories during the Enlightenment.
1. Introduction of the seminar: Legal Pluralism, Catholic Universalism and Racial Segregation.
2. Race: the word and the concept in the U.S. and the Western European historiographies.
3. The “Iberian Pride”: mixed race societies in Latin America versus Jim Crow system U.S.
4. Crusade and conquest: the Medieval roots of persecution
5. Cleanliness of blood, the Iberian Jews, and the Inquisition, 15th-17th centuries.
6. The strange case of the Basque nobility.
7. The tragedy of the Spanish Moriscos compared to the Elizabethan plantation in Ireland.
8. Mestizos: the first generations of conquistadores’ offspring.
9. The rhythm of anti-Semite persecutions, 16th-18th centuries.
10. Slavery and theories of race.
11. Afro-Americans in Latin America towards invisibility.
13. Conclusion: racial politics against invisible others.