SPANISH HISTORIOGRAPHY ON THE QUESTION OF RACE, 1940s-2010: HOW HAVE HISTORIANS APPROACHED PURITY OF BLOOD?

By

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Abstract

The concept of “purity of blood” in fifteenth and sixteenth century Iberia is one that has given rise to many historical interpretations throughout the decades. The way that race is conceptualized and understood by both the historians who interpret it, and by the society in which it functioned, has shaped the way in which modern historians have approached the study of race. Three significant contributions to the understanding of the idea of race within the Iberian Peninsula of the late medieval and early modern periods are those of Américo Castro, Henry Kamen and David Nirenberg. Each historian approaches race in a fundamentally distinct manner. While historians construct new ideas and ways of understanding the Iberian concept of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and race itself - in the past, it is evident that they wrestle with difficulties that are by no means unique, for scholarship continues to strive to add something new to the problem of classifying and identifying human groups, as is our sociological tendency.
Introduction

The concept of “purity of blood” in fifteenth and sixteenth century Iberia is one that has given rise to many historical interpretations throughout the decades. One notable interpretation is that of Henry Kamen. He believes he has come to the crux of the limpieza de sangre statutes, “The central issue [in the creation and implementation of these statutes],” he argues, “was power: race or religion were secondary.”¹ But were the purity of blood statutes simply an intricate system of social constructs were created for the sole purpose of obtaining and maintaining power for the ones who wielded them? How significant was race to the motivations of the people who employed the term in Spain and Portugal (in the 1500s and 1600s) and did it mean what we have come to understand by “race” today? I believe that Max Herring Torres is correct in his analysis when he states that, “La limpieza de sangre ha sido interpretada desde multiples perspectivas y no existe consenso sobre su significado en el marco de la historia de racismo.”² This however, has not halted historians’ attempts to explicate the role of racism in the phenomenon of purity of blood statutes. It is my objective to assess the persuasiveness of various theories relating to this question.

In order to fully address the questions posed above, it is important to first reconstruct the historical background of the establishment and institutionalization of the statutes of limpieza de sangre, as well as to develop an understanding of the concepts underlying its creation. After providing some historical background, I will reconstruct the historiographical development of the discussion of the issue of race in the phenomenon of limpieza de sangre and will present and

discuss various historians’ well established opinions on the matter. This development will be reconstructed chronologically. I will begin by probing the positions of historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and follow the historiographical debate up to the present day. I will then provide an analysis of the different attitudes and arguments of important scholars and will explore the perspectives and understandings that led each of the scholars to their respective conclusions.

**Historical Background**

During a long period in the Middle Ages spanning from the Umayyad conquest of Spain in the eighth century to the culmination of the Reconquista at the end of the fifteenth century, Christians, Muslims and Jews lived in a relatively stable condition of inequality yet mutual tolerance that historians have called *convivencia*. This term was coined by Americo Castro in 1948 in his book, “España en su Historia” and has been widely accepted by scholars of later generations. Though Muslims and Jews for the most part were given a lower status that that of Christians, they managed to live and work together in their respective geographical areas and social spheres. In the fourteenth century, *convivencia* began to disintegrate due to, “strains caused by the reconquest of Christian territory from the “Moors”, economic rivalry, the tendency to blame the Jews for poor economic conditions, and the intrinsic fragility of *convivencia*.“\(^3\) In 1391 there were great riots against the Jews that began in Seville and spread to various cities. These riots brought to a climax negative sentiment towards Jews, causing a large number of the victims to convert to Christianity.\(^4\) The expulsion decree that was promulgated in 1492 further increased the number of conversos within the Christian ranks and added to the strain that had

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4 Ibid
been building between “Old Christians” and “New Christians” since 1391. Some conversos quickly climbed within the Christian social and political ranks. A few even held prestigious positions in various sectors of Christian society.  

Purity of blood (as a concept) originated in Castile within this context during the late medieval period. Eventually the application of the concept gave rise to an extensive system of racial hierarchy. According to the historian María Elena Martínez, Spaniards “defined blood purity as the absence of Jewish and heretical antecedents…” The lack of a “pure” Christian blood line could in some cases disqualify individuals from certain elevated positions.

Evidence of opprobrium based on notions of blood purity emerged as early as 1433 when Queen Maria of Aragon decreed that no legal distinction could be made between converso Christians and “natural” Christians. It is safe to assume that this law was put into place because there was a problem with discrimination against converts to the Christian religion.

The most controversial of the early blood statutes was proposed by the city council of Toledo in 1449 after an anti-converso and anti-Jewish riot had broken out. Though statute was intended to discriminate specifically against the most elite conversos of the city and blame them for an oppressive tax that had been enforced locally by the Castilian crown, the statute effectively applied to all conversos in their entirety. This development clearly illustrated the increased tensions rising from anti-converso sentiment at that time. According to the municipal statute, “Christians of Jewish decent were banned from all public and private offices in the city

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6 María Elena Martínez, Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1.
and its jurisdiction.” Statutes similar to the Toledo decree continued to multiply (despite the fact that at the onset of its creation the archbishop, the pope, and the king denounced the statute) especially within the sixteenth century, and were eventually predominant within the clergy and within various prestigious fraternities as well as professional and scholarly institutions. One of the most unyielding statutes was enacted by the anti-Semitic archbishop Juan Martínez Silíceo of the cathedral chapter of Toledo in 1547. As many historians note, these statutes did not go unopposed. Notably, “[Silíceos statute was condemned by the University of Alcalá de Herares. It did not receive papal approval until 1555 and royal approval the following year.” Indeed many clergy members detested and opposed the said statutes and vehemently disputed their validity. All the same, the Colegios mayores – university institutions that granted specialized and higher level academic degrees such as doctorates – passed similar statutes in their efforts to maintain the exclusivity of their institutions. The first private institution to pass a purity of blood statute was the Colegio Mayor of San Bartolomé at the University of Salamanca in 1414. The constitution of the Colegio stated that in order for membership into the Colegio, a person had to be of “a pure bloodline.” This set the stage for other institutions enact similar discriminatory statutes.

There is a common perception among people who are not experts in Spanish history that Holy Office was the entity that created and established the purity of blood statutes, but this is not so. As María Elena Martinez states, “The Holy Office certainly contributed to the preoccupation with purity of blood once it came into being, but it clearly was not solely responsible for it.” Indeed the Holy Office was established in 1480 yet did not require proof of limpieza de sangre

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8 Ibid pg. 364
until the 1560s – this was largely due to the resistance by the papacy in Rome give sanction to such decrees. Now I will discuss the manner in which various influential historians – Américo Castro, Henry Kamen, and David Nirenberg – approached the historical phenomenon that I have just described, including the concept of “race” as a category of analysis and as a historical construct in their work.

Américo Castro

Américo Castro y Quesada (born May 4, 1885, Catangallo, Brazil – died July 25, 1972, Lloret de Mar, Spain) was a Spanish cultural historian and philologist who focused on the history of medieval Spain and its interpretations. Castro held a chair at the University of Madrid for quarter of a century and lectured at universities throughout Latin America as well as North America. According to The South Central Modern Language Associations,

[Castro was] Spain's Ambassador to Germany in 1931-32, and the recipient of honorary degrees from both European and Latin American universities, Professor Castro, with Franco's rise to power in Spain, went into permanent exile from his beloved country. While his home outside Madrid was being used to garrison "Nationalist" troops, Dr. Castro turned to the Western Hemisphere.10

Before the Spanish Civil War, his focus had been primarily on the critique of Spanish literature. Following the war, Castro’s analysis moved towards the manner in which modern Spain has been affected by the shift of control during the Middle Ages from Muslim to Christian forces.11 The period after the Spanish Civil War was one of great introspection for the Spanish people. It was characterized by a demoralized society in which a vacuum had been left by the disillusionment with war, the grand kingdom that had once been Spain, and the question of what

it truly meant to be “Spanish.” As José L. Gómez Martínez put it, “[La Guerra Civil] demostró lo subjetivo y unilateral de [los análisis de la esencia de España] y, en definitiva, el poco valor practico de sus conclusiones en el entendimiento del ser de España.”

The unraveling of Spanish history set the scene for Castro to develop a new understanding of being Spanish as distinctly different from that of being European. His greatest contribution to Spanish history, according to historians such as Samuel G. Armistead from the University of California, was his argument that a symbiotic relationship had existed between the three prominent religions of the Iberian Peninsula – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Crucially, Castro felt that modern Spain was a product of the meshing and intertwining of these of cultures. His was a very dramatic reinterpretation of Spanish history for its time and his unique perspective made a debut in his book *España en su historia* (1948).

With such innovative ideas came harsh criticism within the academic world, Castro’s biggest nemesis was Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz who was said to have proclaimed regarding Castro’s death, “Nunca nos has convencido!” Sanchez-Albornoz’s greatest point of dissention with Castro was his view of the influence of the Arab culture and its contribution to modern Spain. Gómez Martínez explains how Castro’s interpretation implied that, “Si la morada vital de los españoles comenzó a formarse en el siglo VIII, todo lo anterior, según Castro, cae fuera de los limites de la verdadera historia de los españoles.”

The essence of the dispute lay in the desire to define authentic hispanicity under the nationalist guise that prevailed during the early

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14 Ibid pg. 272
20th century. Indeed, for Castro the core of what it is to be Spanish was not yet wrought and in place until after the arrival of the Arabs and their infusion of Islamic culture into a Christian society. Sanchez-Albornoz, by contrast, believed that while Arab influence did contribute to some degree towards the development of Spain, the constant war caused by the fight actually disintegrated the economic abilities of Spain and thus prevented Spaniards from competing economically with other European nations.\textsuperscript{16} For Sánchez, the Christian, Gothic character of Spain was decisive and definitive to Hispanicity, while the Muslim contributions to Hispanic culture were not only minor—they were deleterious to the realization of the potential of “authentic” Spanish culture. The sharp disagreement between him and Castro on this subject was the focal point of an intense, on-going rivalry between the two men. This intellectual feud continued to the end of both of their lives.

Américo Castro had much to say regarding the repercussions of the Spanish Inquisition. According to Henry Kamen’s assessment of Castro’s work,

Don Americo Castro, in a pioneering presentation first published in 1948, when the Franco regime was firmly ensconced in Spain, expressed the pessimism of many when he concluded, “el entronizamiento de la ineptitud mental y la parálisis de los capaces de usar con acierto su inteligencia” were consequences of the regimes of the Inquisition, and that “no pensar, no saber, no leer” became the order of the day.\textsuperscript{17}

Castro, then, had essentially accepted the “black legend” of the Inquisition. Coinined in 1914 by Spanish historian Julián Judería Loyot in his book \textit{La Leyenda negra}, this pessimistic narrative basically describes the Inquisition as the medieval perpetrator of a massacre in Spain. Castro went so far as to attribute the authoritarian dictatorship of Francisco Franco and the fall of

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid pg. 309
the Spanish Republic in 1936 to the ignorance and silence of the Spanish people that had risen, according to him, in consequence of the Inquisition. The Inquisition, he argued, was the cause of the socio-economic and political “backwardness” of twentieth century Spain, and the “mental ineptitude” of the people who conducted it was the same as that of the individuals who allowed limpieza de sangre statutes to be passed in various sectors of late medieval and early modern Spanish society.

Castro on various occasions attempts to explain the way in which the concept of race is not valid in the study of history. In his major work, The Structure of Spanish History, he states outright, “I do not question the validity of the concept of races, but only as a concept it is not useful in the study of history.” Another example of his attitude towards the concept of race is his statement that, “Los castellanos y aragoneses no eran ni visigodos ni romanos ni celtiberos, porque la dimensión colectiva de un grupo humano depende de una forma social y no de una sustancia biológica-psíquica, latente y perdible.”  

Castro’s perspective, according to these particular arguments, is that first, race is a valid concept (although he does not explain under what circumstances or what he meant by it) and second; that nonetheless a group of people cannot be identified by any biological means, but rather by the collective social forms of that group, that is, by its culture.

An interesting point in this regard is that although Castro does not feel that race is valid within the study of history, he often makes comments regarding the Jewish people that make me question his supposed dismissal of race as a means of historical analysis. I am particularly struck by the manner in which he essentializes Jewish difference and judges it. For example, argues, “The Jew proudly kept himself apart from the other peoples: ‘they eat and sleep apart from the

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18 Ibid pg. 307
others…, they do not make unions with alien women…The Hebrews’ radical Messianism took them away from contacts with the present, and deprived them of a rational construction of the world experience.”

Clearly, Castro’s perspective hinges on a rather deprecatory judgment of the culture. This kind of criticism closely resembles modern day anti-Semitism.

Another important point to note about this perspective is that it clearly contradicts Castro’s theory of *convivencia* which essentially seeks to explain Spain’s national identity as an intermingling of three separate cultures. How can *convivencia* work as a concept when one of the cultures involved in this intermingling is essentially clannish and separatist? The Jewish people either contributed to this cultural melting pot, or it distinguished itself as homogenous group set apart from what Castro would consider the essential Spanish culture as we know it. To be fair, Castro attempts to explain this phenomenon of *convivencia* by explaining that in the intermingling of the separate cultures, all were nonetheless independently attempting to assert themselves over the others.

Notably, in his work Castro attempts to identify those distinguishing traits that separated the Christians, Muslims and Jews of medieval Iberia by referring to the groups as castes rather than “races” or “cultures.” Yet, discordantly, “caste” is one of the terms by which believers in blood purity defined Moors and Jews in self-consciously racialist terms. David Nirenberg clarifies this point, “Castro’s easy isolation of race in the epidermis, for example, blinded him to the ways in which his methodology simply displaced many of the naturalizing and essentializing functions of “race” into the less charged term of “caste.” So by using “caste” Castro avoided

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using the term “race” while differentiating each particular group of people in essentialist terms that have a strong affinity with racism. This distinction is evident in Castro’s statement that,

The preoccupation, Semitic in origin, with keeping pure the bloodlines of the caste is expressed with great frequency in the literature of Spanish Jews: “The Jews said to the Holy Law: Thou art very holy, we took thee as a bride of high caste, we prize thee like a golden necklace.” As in Christian examples previously cited, caste here means “lineage,” in this case uncontaminated by impure blood.22

Here Castro is attributing blood purity to “Semitic” races, specifically the Jews. Ironically, in this particular quote he is not trying to avoid antiquated racist ideas or revealing his own underlying racism. The manner in which he tacitly accepts faulting the Jews for their own fate as an uncomfortable given (in this case the Inquisition) can oftentimes lead one to believe that Castro himself is an abettor in these antiquated methods of social distinctions and in placing the blame for social evils on the Jewish people.

To elaborate on the previous point, Castro believed that “purity of blood” was not a concept that developed in the Middle Ages, but one that had taken root much earlier as a result of Jewish influence.

The concern for being “pure in blood” (limpio de sangre) which disturbed Christian Spaniards from the fifteenth century on springs from antecedents much older than the establishment in 1481 of that form of the Inquisition particular to Spain. In this instance, the Hispano-Christian imitated a system of individual and collective evaluation very characteristic of the Hispano-Hebrew, as hated and feared as he was admired and copied. This phenomenon is of capital importance as a symptom of the way in which Spanish life functioned, especially from the fifteenth century on. The more Hispano-Hebrews were persecuted, the more the Semitic system of purity of lineage was taken over. 23

23 Ibid
Therefore, according to Castro, none other than the Jews were to blame for the ideology of pure lineage. Castro specifically traced *limpieza de sangre* to biblical laws that discouraged marriages between the Israelites and alien peoples. This idea of Jewish culpability for racist laws, which Castro does not even begin to prove but merely asserts as if its validity were obvious, is also evident in the manner which Castro identifies the origins of the Inquisition. Castro also attributes this institution to Jewish beliefs. “Both forms of persecution, the religious and the racial, were, according to Castro, alien to the Spanish spirit, but were well within the framework of Jewish law and Jewish social and religious practices.”

According to Netanyahu, Castro uses various sources which one can use to examine his perspective on *limpieza* and the role which race played into it: biblical, Talmudic, and medieval. The one most relevant for our discussion is Castro’s interpretation of the Bible in order to fit his purposes. Castro makes note of the Biblical Jewish idea of “choseness” which attempts to distinguish the people of Israel from other surrounding peoples. Castro maintained that the Christians had assimilated to the Jewish ideologies of being “set apart” in their pursuance of a spotless lineage. For example, he cites in Ezra the passage where the prophet chastises the Israelites for not keeping themselves separate from neighboring tribes. He maintains that this belief is what made the Jews separate and keep only unto themselves. As Netanyahu observes, “Castro cites Deuteronomy 7:6, which speaks of the Election of Israel, and interprets that verse as a reflection of the circumstance that certain primitive peoples ‘assign a magic and spiritual value to blood.’”

Netanyahu goes on to explain that Castro correlated these supposed beliefs about blood to ideas held by the predecessors of the Israelite people and

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24 Ibid. pg. 2
25 Ibid. pg. 398
26 Ibid pg. 399
continues to explain that, “Castro identifies blood with race, doubtlessly on the basis of the common usage of the word in Latin and other Western languages, and then relates the primitive notions about blood to the ancient Hebrews.” However, the biblical proscription of intermarriage between Israelites and their neighbors was anchored in the taboo against idolatry, and did not make recourse to any notion of race such as medieval Christians, much less Spaniards today, would define it.

If Castro truly associated the biblical idea of “blood” with a medieval and/or modern concept of “race,” and accused the Jews of being a kind of race apart, indeed a foreign nation of bigots who injected the very destructive concept of race into the pristine culture of Christian Spain, then it is hard to believe that Castro truly approached race as an invalid concept for the purposes of studying Spanish history. His attempts to mask his concerns with race with the concept of “caste” do not entirely persuade us that Castro’s analysis truly steered clear of notions of race. Castro essentialized by characterizing the Jews as a homogenous and archetypal group, thus perhaps slipping into racist thought. Furthermore, his language when referring to the Jewish people as a whole is objectifying and in that sense dehumanizing. For instance, he makes recourse to old anti-Semitic tropes of Jewish “tribalism” and crude materialism when he writes, “He [the Jew] concerned himself only with matters interesting to his protectors, and did not write freely in Castilian on philosophy or theology, which the Church left uncultivated, for he was persecuted enough without this. The Jews confined themselves to performing tasks in the Christian milieu which would bring them economic advantage or social prestige.” Notice the use an archetype, “the Jew,” which is a telltale sign of an essentialist perspective.

27 Ibid pg. 400
Following our analysis of Américo Castro, we will now explore the perspectives of a historian whose understanding of Iberian history developed after Castro’s generation, and who has attempted to take a much more objective perspective on medieval Spain and the Inquisition, Henry Kamen.

**Henry Kamen**

British historian Henry Arthur Francis Kamen is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society in London and an emeritus professor of the Higher Council for Scientific Research in Barcelona. Born in Rangoon, Burma in 1936, he was educated at Oxford and arrived in Spain in the 1960’s where he learned the Castilian language and Spanish history while embracing the Hispanic culture. Mark Aloff, a colleague, comments on Kamen’s most recent endeavors, “Since [his arrival in Spain] he has produced more than a dozen ground-breaking studies on various aspects of peninsular history, from Spain’s expansion overseas to cultural and religious conflict in 17th-century Catalonia, as well as major biographies of Philip II and the Duke of Alba.”

Though not of Spanish descent, he set out to reject the idea that characterized Spain as an intolerant and inhumane nation. This humanizing – as opposed to apologetic – approach is perhaps the crux of what Aloff calls Kamen’s “ground breaking” contribution to historiography on the Spanish Inquisition and *limpieza de sangre*.

Henry Kamen is renowned as one of the pioneers in the rejection of the “black legend.” He describes the Inquisitorial methods of questioning as more humane than the common Spanish prison and he also discards the portrayal of the Inquisitorial authorities as mere religious fanatics.

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and sadists. He often times makes the case that the Holy Office was neither money-hungry, nor excessively cruel. He states, “Finally, we need to be clear about the role of the Inquisition. The Holy Office was an unpleasant institution, but hardly lavish. And, apart from the blood persecution of conversos in the period of 1480-1520 in southern Spain, it was hardly the most terrifying persecutor of early modern times.”31 This attempt to curb the negative sentiments and to present a more balanced approach towards inquisitorial functionaries, the clergy and their methods, is present in several of Kamen’s publishing and first took place in his 1968 work, The Spanish Inquisition.

Kamen holds that for too long Spain had been negatively characterized as a nation whose intolerance was embraced even by its most enlightened thinkers – intolerant liberals, as it were.32 He blames this characterization on European nations, such as France during the mid-eighteenth century, whose interests lay solely on debilitating the image of Spain “The French, for example, were precisely those most interested in maximizing Spanish weaknesses. They helped to create what I shall subsequently be referring to as a ‘myth.’”33 He attributes this bias to more specifically during the period of the French Enlightenment which sought to characterize Spain as decadent and faltering. Kamen feels that historians did not show enough skepticism towards the observations of Spain by those who were non-Spaniards. Though Spain was seen as the principle actor within the Counter-Reformation, Kamen believes that for most of the sixteenth-century, Spain actually for the most part held the middle ground within Europe during this period of tumultuous religious persecutions.34

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32 Kamen, Henry. “Toleration and Dissent in Spain.” Pg. 5
33 Kamen, Henry. “The Decline of Spain: A Historical Myth?” Pg. 25
34 Ibid
Kamen debunks this widespread idea of Spanish backwardness and intolerance by gathering and presenting the varying opinions of early modern Spanish clergy and scholars, in order to lay a foundation for the arguments for ideological diversity within Spain. For example, he states, “From the beginning of their reign in 1474, Ferdinand and Isabella determined to maintain between Jews and Christians the same peace that they were trying to establish between the cities and among the nobility.”

Here we can see the manner in which he characterizes the King and Queen not as blood thirsty Catholic zealots, but as royalty with a determination to maintain peace within their kingdom between all parties. In this fashion, Kamen also attempts to show that public dissent was commonplace, especially among the learned, and among various levels of the clergy. Kamen refers to this dissent as the “alternative” tradition and makes the argument that Spain provided an arena for all such disputes to be openly discussed without fear or repercussion. Not only were dissenters allowed a platform from which to express themselves, Kamen also goes on to state that occasionally the “alternative” opinion prevailed over the dominant view. He argues, “Disagreement with the Inquisition was extensive, and has been well documented; it is well known that there was also disagreement with another major policy decision of the period, the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.”

Kamen’s attention to the expulsion of the Jews is quite telling, for the anti-Jewish riots of 1391 and the expulsion of 1492 have for long been seen as the quintessential climax points in the deterioration of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Spain. By collecting evidence suggesting that the expulsion was a controversial event, he hopes to portray Spain as a nation open to various schools of thought as well as a nation with a considerable cohort of dissenters.

[36 Ibid Pg. 20
[37 Ibid Pg. 9]
who were openly willing to fight against injustice, Kamen explains, “las acciones mas extremas de la Inquisición no estaban necesariamente de conformidad con las normas de la época.”38

Kamen also analyzes the stigma attached to the concept of limpieza de sangre – specifically the pessimism regarding Spain common in historical writing about the country during the Franco regime – as seen in the historiography of Américo Castro. Kamen holds that Américo Castro placed far too much emphasis on the Inquisition’s suppression of converso intellects and that limpieza did not quite impact society to the extent that some historians, such as Castro, tend to lean toward. In this article, “Limpieza and the Ghost of Américo Castro, Kamen hopes to trump the common notion that racism and mentalities associated with limpieza de sangre were widespread and broadly accepted phenomena. He states:

The fact is that we have, in limpieza and racism, fruitful concepts which in the hands of the unwary can be made to yield quite extravagant conclusions. It should no longer be possible to cling to the antiquated view of the Inquisition as “one of the most lavish and terrifying apparatuses for state control of its citizens in modern times (Heiple 231).” We happen to know a bit more about how limpieza and the Inquisition functioned.39

This statement illustrate Kamen’s overarching thesis that limpieza and racism were not hegemonic, but rather ideas that were clearly abused by “unwary” chroniclers and propagandists, and later on inflated to create the concept of the nefarious Inquisition and blood statutes which in the early twentieth century was part and parcel of the “black legend.”

One explanation that Kamen offers for the conflation of the Inquisition and limpieza was that racism was an occurrence that was concentrated not within the upper echelons of society, but

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of the lower social strata. (He specifically mentions that owing to the large concentration of *conversos* present within the nobility, the upper classes did not support the Inquisition as much as the masses did. The latter, Kamen argues, viewed the Jews competitors rather than partners. Here Kamen is assuming that individuals within the classes held a higher regard for utility rather than religious fervor.\(^{40}\) In this view, racism was something deeply rooted within the Iberian mentality, but not manifested equally across the social classes. Kamen does point out specifically that the decision to expel the Jews in 1492 was that of the crown itself and that this measure, in his opinion, was taken out of solely religious purposes.\(^{41}\) But this contention only raises another question, and Kamen does not answer it: Does the fact that the higher social stratum of Spain was not always in accord with the policies of *limpieza* and the Inquisition necessarily mean that members of the stratum did not hold the racist views that Kamen argues were present within the Iberian mentality? At any rate, to elaborate this point, Kamen makes a clear distinction between the matter of blood purity (he mentions that these statutes were not widely accepted, and mostly concentrated in Castile), and the global issue of anti-Semitism, which he states was always a powerful force in Spain.\(^{42}\) He elaborates this point in the following statement,

The anti-Semitism of the inquisitors was clearly not something they personally invented, but a result of prejudices and attitudes which were deeply rooted in Spanish society, born out of a long coexistence with probably the biggest Jewish community in Europe. Anti-Semitic prejudices were ingrained in Spanish society and survive to this day, both on the right and on the left of the political spectrum.\(^{43}\)

So according to Kamen, the problem that gave rise to the mentality present within the Holy Office lay not with the Inquisition, but rather with the mindset of the society in itself –

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\(^{43}\) Ibid pg. 143
something that had been present much earlier than the establishment of the Inquisition. The Inquisitor’s hatred towards Jews was an ingrained historical legacy that had been built upon through generations. The anti-Semitic method of thought had been inherited from previous prejudices and anti-Judaic sentiments which gave rise to discrimination. “Early modern Spain was a society in which Jews, both unconverted and converted, played a significant role. It was normal that anti-Semitism should play a part in politics and culture at that time, though perhaps surprising that it should continue to maintain its vigor throughout the five hundred years after the expulsion of 1492.” Kamen therefore underscores the fact that anti-Semitism is present and deep rooted within Iberian mentality, but effectively neglects to address the cause of this mindset – which presents a rather deficient exposition of the presence of anti-Semitism before the establishment of the Inquisition. So rather than characterize the Holy Office as an institution that perpetrated anti-Semitic ideology, Kamen characterizes the Inquisition as an institution that at times attempted to fight these negatives stereotypes. For example, there were instances in Catalonia where individuals would insult each other by calling each other “Jews” and Kamen states the Inquisition in response, “…acted decisively at all times against those using the phrase, on the grounds that it was socially divisive and also theologically meaningless unless heresy was involved. Yet the practice continued.”

Another significant aspect of Kamen’s methodology is his use of the word “antisemitism.” Antisemitism is a nineteenth-century term whose significance is essentially pseudo-scientific in that it assumes there is a Semitic people with distinct Semitic blood. This delineation of the term was not present in early modern Spain, especially not as it is understood today. Before the nineteenth century the appropriate term would have been anti-Judaism, (which

44 Ibid
refers to the belief system) rather than antisemitism (which refers to race). This reflects a certain historical insensitivity to key terms as he is essentializing “antisemitism” and applying it liberally to time periods in which it would not be understood as we understand it today.

Kamen attributes Spain’s interest in blood purity and race to a value system of chivalry and honor that began in the early Middle Ages – as opposed to anti-Semitism which he attributes to Iberia’s long standing contact with Jews. In *Inquisition and Society in Spain*, he attempts to outline the root of social attitudes within late mediaeval Spain. First, Kamen explains that social mobility within society also allowed for mobility of ideals between the upper and lower classes. The attitude held by the nobility could now be transmitted and upheld by the masses, and rank could be assigned to members of various strata of society, not just the wealthiest and most powerful. Kamen explains, “In time the respected ideals’ of society – valor, virility, piety, honest wealth – became the basis of ‘honor’ and ‘reputation.’”

This ideal of honor was held in high regard during the mediaeval period and greatly affected an individual’s standing within society. It is important to stress that although ideas held more mobility between classes, the nobles’ relatively frequent interaction and arguably symbiotic relationship with the Jews before 1492, and the intermarrying of conversos with the nobility – as opposed to the experience of the masses, which consisted of competition with Jews – kept the nobles from fully embracing the policies of *limpieza* as opposed to the values of honor and chivalry that were more easily transmitted from one social strata to the other.

“By the fifteenth century the deterioration in the social position of Jews and Muslims had decisively affected their capacity to obtain honor. Certainly, the Castilian view that all Old Christians, by the mere fact of not being tainted by Semitic blood were honorable was becoming

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widespread.” The concept of honor that had once been a social stigma among class had soon developed into racism and racial antagonism. Kamen adds that during this period many felt that honor could be preserved by the safeguarding of one’s lineage against non-Christian contamination. The highest ranks of society by the 1500s were known to be able to trace their descent through *conversos*, and Old Christian Spain would not be able to sustain itself if *conversos* were not kept from infiltrating. Kamen says that due to this fear, “A few zealous souls therefore considered that now was the time to stop the Jewish fifth column. With this we have the beginnings of a new stress on racial purity and the consequent rise of the cult of *limpieza de sangre*.“  

His explanation on the origins of *limpieza de sangre* are followed by a very stringent conclusion that the statutes of purity of blood did not have the overwhelming influence and effect that some individuals claim regarding the Inquisition. “Some persons and groups of anti-Semitic inclination may have been obsessed, but there was no generalized ‘violent’ support for [purity of blood], nor any resulting straitjacket on conformity…” This brings us back to a very prominent aspect of Kamen’s thesis, that the racialization of Spain that had resulted from these statutes was actually the result of a small group of anti-Semitic individuals whose mindset had been conditioned by a long history of contact with Semitic cultures in the Iberian peninsula.  

One area where Kamen fails to fully express his ideas is in the concept of “race” itself. He does not develop the manner in which race was conceptualized within the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula despite the fact that he attempts to separate the concepts of honor, blood purity, race and anti-Semitism. This challenge of distinguishing concepts in itself can be quite complex.

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47 Ibid pg. 115  
48 Ibid  
49 Ibid pg. 146
and his attempt to face it without fully dealing with the significance of each individual term (as it applies to the time period) often leaves his arguments lacking in depth. In Kamen’s work, *Imagining Spain*, he devotes a section of his book to “The Inquisition and race” where he postulates his idea of distinguishing antisemitism and blood purity. This section is dedicated to debunking the association of the two terms and it is evident in his critique of historians who label Spain as, “a society in the grip of an anti-Semitic obsession about blood purity.”

We have previously assessed Kamen’s belief of an inherent antisemitic tradition in Spain, but when faced with the possibility of elaborating on this point he states, “The persistence of prejudice against Jews, however, is something quite different from the myth that concerns us here.” He completely avoids the root of the issue at hand, and dismisses the possibility of addressing this intrinsic racist mentality that he assigned to Spanish society. In addition to avoiding this important point, Kamen does not assign a cultural significance to the term “race” as it was understood during the Middle Ages. As against this approach, Max S. Hering Torres breaks down the study of “race” and its understanding among modern historians. He offers the following suggestion:

Un análisis histórico debería intentar todo lo contrario: señalar su historicidad en aras de rescatar su variabilidad conceptual y su polisemia. La raza y el racismo no son constantes antropológicas, tampoco esencialismos; por el contrario, son polimorfos, obedecen a sistemas, teorías o prácticas supremamente dúctiles. La unicidad conceptual e histórica del racismo es sólo una ilusión teleológica. En este sentido, es provechoso referenciar el estado del arte y señalar cómo los racismos han sido estudiados en plural, en diferentes temporalidades y esferas sociales.

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50 Ibid 143
51 Ibid
In his zeal to minimize the impact of blood statutes within Inquisitorial Spain, Kamen has failed to fully develop and identify the manner in which “race” was viewed. Torres explains explicitly that race is not a historical constant, it has many forms within the period it is studied and in order to come to a better understanding of “race” one must examine the manner in which it is looked at in its historical context. Torres and Kamen differ in that Kamen is more interested in developing the social impact and legal extent of *limpieza* rather than the evolution of the meaning of racism. I would argue that without a clear understanding of what “racism” signified to people of the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, it dilutes the manner in which Kamen’s audience can comprehend the distinctions he makes between anti-Semitism and that of *limpieza*. This lack of clarification on the concept of “race” and leads to a more significant question: how can racism that is not anti-Judaism not have any association with the concept of anti-Semitism?

Kamen’s overall approach to the study of the Inquisition attempts to come from an objective and neutral perspective. His tone oftentimes gives the impression that he holds the least biased and most historiographically informed outlook on the mindset and origins of the Inquisition. His tone is exemplified in the following paragraph regarding the “myth” of the Inquisition:

Despite the overwhelming evidence about the limited context of blood purity statutes, the myth about their role will possibly continue to survive because it offers a beautifully easy explanation for the complex nature of social relationships in Golden Age Spain. We choose myths because they confirm conclusions at which we have already arrived, regardless of whether they are true.\(^{53}\)

Not only does this observation hold a subtle air of arrogance, it also assumes that historiographers who hold to an idea other than his are simply buying into a socially constructed myth that holds no historical truth whatsoever. In other words, Kamen’s position is categorical. Though he does a good job of avoiding the demonization of Spain – a developed and inherited by modern historians that exemplifies the rationalist conceit of the present towards the past - this attitude of one “supremely objective” historian is evident throughout his writings.

The last historian whose work we will examine is David Nirenberg. His late modern or arguably post-modern approach is distinct in that it is much deeper and abstract in the manner which it dissects the concept of “race” and looks towards the way individuals in the Middle Ages understood racism, rather than solely the impact which it had within medieval and (to a lesser degree) early modern society.

**David Nirenberg**

David Nirenberg is currently Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and the Department of History at the University of Chicago. He earned his Bachelor’s Degree in history from Yale in 1986 and his Doctorate at Princeton in 1992. According to his on-line biographical portrait in the website of the University of Chicago, “His work focuses on the co-production of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic cultures: that is, on how these cultures each constitute themselves by interrelating with or thinking about the others.”54 Nirenberg’s contributions to the particular topic on which this paper concentrates differ from those of historians in the twentieth century in that his focus is not so much the social and legal implications of race and limpieza, but of the manner in which Spanish society constructed and understood these topics. Due to this emphasis

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in emphasis, much of his work tends focus more on the development of ideas – such as race – as opposed to writers like Kamen whose focus is on structures and behaviors, comparatively more concrete subjects, so to speak.

One of Nirenberg’s most relevant contributions for our purposes is one which he terms the “crisis of classification,” which he argues gave rise to statues of purity of blood. The Medieval Christians in Spain had used the Jews as a group from which to distinguish their own identity and to assert their religion above others. Nirenberg explains this phenomenon as follows:

The perception of crisis was provoked not by the converts’ “Jewish” practices but by a much more complex phenomenon: the mass conversion’s destabilization of an oppositional process of identification by which generations of Christians had defined themselves theologically and sociologically against Jews and Judaism. It is well known that Christianity had since its earliest days used the Jew to represent the anti-Christian, mapping polarized dualities, such as spiritual-material, allegorical-literal, sighted-blind, redemptive-damning, godly-satanic, good-evil, onto the pairing Christian-Jew.55

Following the 1391 conversion of the Jews some 2/3 of Iberian Jews, the hierarchies that had once maintained the equilibrium of the Judeo-Christian world in Iberia and maintained Christianity as the superior force had been significantly upset. Nirenberg underscores that the Jews’ rejection of Christ and their waywardness had once been pivotal in contrasting the pious Christian from Jews who had been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Without the Jews to provide a witness to the truth of the Christian faith, the factors that had once elevated the Christians were significantly diluted. Nirenberg adds that these distinctions that were erased had once been, “fundamental to the representation of Christian political and social privilege”56 but now, due to the supposed elevation of the converts from Jews to Christians, these distinctions were no longer

56 Ibid Pg. 1088
Christian theology, according to Nirenberg, posits extremes between good and evil. In that sense, Christianity is a dualistic system of thought. In this system, Christians sought to elevate themselves above the immorality that the Jewish people allegedly represented.

He asserts that this crisis arose following the conversion of many Castilian and Aragonese Jews in 1391 as a distinct problem for Christians, and explains this problem as follows: “The concern of Christians in the years after 1391 was not that religious identity was unchanging but rather the opposite, that the disappearance of the Jews and the emergence of the conversos would undermine the distinctive value and meaning of Christian identity.”

After 1391, the lines that had defined this value and that meaning had been effectively blurred.

This “crisis of classification” Nirenberg argues, led Christians to distinguish themselves from those who were no longer Jews, but converso brethren, and the Christians did this by trying to stigmatize the converts as thinly-hidden “Jews.” Yet, “the [discursive] transformation of the convert from Christian back into ‘Jew’ [achieved by this maneuver] required a century of vast sociological and theological change.” Nirenberg asserts that this change did not occur spontaneously, but arose from previously available categories that were now merely altered to serve the new purposes of genealogical classification – in other words, the classification of people by their lineage, which added a biological element to the manner in which people were categorized. Nirenberg explains the transformation of a system religious classification into a genealogical system in the following statement:

The point, in short, is that words like *raza*, *casta*, and *linaje* were already embedded in identifiably biological ideas about animal breeding and reproduction in the first half of the fifteenth century. Moreover,

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57 Ibid Pg. 1066
the sudden and explicit application of this vocabulary to Jews coincides chronologically with the appearance of anti-converso ideology which sought to establish new religious categories and discriminations, and legitimate these by naturalizing their reproduction. 59

Nirenberg examines the way that pre-modern Iberian peoples applied biological notions in order to give validity to the contention that morality can be hereditary. He comes to the conclusion that though these notions may not have been legitimate in the modern sense, their use by late medieval Iberians nonetheless renders invalid certain historical arguments that had preceded Nirenberg. Specifically, he debunks the notion that the absence of a modern, biological concept of race exempted pre-modern Iberian subjects from what we would term as “racism” today.

Nirenberg argues that late medieval Spaniards transferred ideas of hereditability from areas that were generally acceptable in their day – such as animal sciences – to other areas – such as sacramental theology. Nirenberg gives the example of Alonso de Cartagena’s claims about the “deep heritability” of traits such as courage and nobility – tying character traits to that of heredity.60 Nirenberg provides this and other examples to demonstrate that popular and learned discourse, “extended the cultivation of ‘raza’ into new corners of culture and society, we can literally say that it made fifteenth-century Spain more “racial.”61 Nirenberg is referring to the transfer ways of speaking of animal husbandry to the realm people in order to serve the purposes of those attempting to distinguish conversos from Old Christians. This transformation of ideas and terminologies was a process that steadily embedded itself within Spanish of thought as Nirenberg asserts, “Within a generation or two, the Iberian body politic had produced a thick

60 Ibid pg. 259
61 Ibid
hedge of inquisition and genealogy in order to protect itself from penetration by the "Jewish race" and its cultural attributes.”

Through his theory of the “crisis of classification,” Nirenberg explains how there arose a need for change in the manner in which Iberian Christians classified Jews and distinguished themselves from converts. This change is evident in the evolution of terms used to draw distinctions between Christians and “Jews.” While earlier terms had focused on religious and theological factors, the later terms focused on lineage and genealogy. After assessing the need for such a change, Nirenberg begins to uncover the manner in which Spaniards in the High Middle Ages reached these conclusions through the use of a new concept, “blood purity.” Interestingly enough, the same problem that Christians faced in the High Middle Ages – identifying and solidifying group identities – plagues historians even now: “Sciences have been struggling with mixed success to find new terms and theories with which to describe and explain the persistence of group identity and group theories across time and space.”

First and foremost, Nirenberg establishes that the manner in which historians previously classified “racism” depended on whether or not the definition was based on a modern biological understanding of the term. Nirenberg argues that historian’s biological understanding of race was their criterion for dismissing or labeling groups or societies as “racist.” Because historians did not find that medieval Iberians spoke in modern biological terms about race, they exonerate them of the charge of racism.63 Racism, as it is defined in modern times, locates identity in biological and reproductive processes. Nirenberg asserts that claims about race, no matter how scientific sounding, do not have any sufficient grounding within true science. Race is a product

of culture, not of nature. This being said, Nirenberg assesses whether or not racism is present before modernity in Iberia by using the same criteria that other historians established in order to label an action or people racist. His purpose in doing so is to recognize whether in Medieval Spain there existed notions of race as we understand the term in present times. Nevertheless, he also presents his belief that there does not exist a true biological racism, and that all methods of identifying race as biological are pseudoscientific. After establishing these foundational principles, he comes to the conclusion that when other eras were judged against this false criterion of “racism”, they could be exculpating from modern notions of racism – thus discharging them from “true” racial discrimination.64

As concerns early modern Spain Nirenberg underscores that new understanding that converso morality was naturally corrupt, real and alleged cultural traits (especially negative ones) were redefined by many members of the clergy and various institutions as supposed racial attributes. This put more and more individuals at risk of being convicted by Inquisitorial tribunals of these crimes of heresy. Nirenberg details some of the traits that were transferred in this manner: “The characteristics encoded in Jewish blood, according to the bishop of Cordoba in 1530, included heresy, apostasy, love of novelty and dissension, ambition, presumption, and hatred of peace.”65 Now any trait that was considered immoral, – whether or not Old Christians viewed it as cultural in origin – and the pejorative terms associated with Judaizers, began to proliferate as time passed. Nirenberg elaborates on the implications of the resulting “judaization” of Spanish discourse as follows:

This “judaization” of Spanish culture was a direct result of the increasingly widespread use of ideas about biological reproduction of somatic and behavioral traits in order to create and legitimate hierarchies and

64 Ibid. pg. 236
65 Ibid pg. 260
discriminations, within a society where extensive intermarriage made the reproductive segregation “Judaism” impossible.\(^{66}\)

As previously mentioned, one of the significant results of culture being associated closely with genealogy grew into what came to be known as \textit{limpieza de sangre}. The blood of non-Christians including converts, was effectively tainted and imagined as inferior to that of “Old Christians,” owing to morality and immorality were inherent within the breeding of the individual. Nirenberg elaborates on this mentality, according to which,

…the possession of any amount of such blood made one liable to heresy and moral corruption; and therefore any descendent of Jews and Muslims, no matter how distant, should be barred from church and secular office, from any number of guilds and professions, and especially from marrying Old Christians.\(^{67}\)

Ultimately, Nirenberg does not seek to come to a conclusion about whether or not race was present before modernity in Spain. Rather, he hopes to dismiss previous arguments that entirely terminate the possibility that the modern concept of race was present in medieval and early modern Spain. The application of race by modern historians, Nirenberg argues, has merely been a projection of modern categories of thought onto those of the past. He suggests that, in a way “there is nothing new under the sun” and that people have a tendency to assign categories and classes to groups – the manner in which society understands these groups changes and evolves depending on the needs and purposes of the people living in the specific time period in which these categories are assigned.

Unlike Castro, Nirenberg is not interested in assigning characteristics, such as race, as though these characteristics were essential and immutable. He is less interested in making statements about the characteristics of people per se than he is in explaining the meaning that

\(^{66}\) Ibid
\(^{67}\) Ibid. pg. 242
people assigned to specific ideas, both in the pre-modern period and in the modern day. This approach avoids “essentialization” which is the idea that groups naturally have inherent and specific traits and functions. Nirenberg avoids essentialism precisely by focusing on how it operated in medieval and early modern Spain and exploring how essentialistic ideas came about.

**Conclusion**

Nirenberg tends to lean towards a certain type of relativism in his writing that is a phenomenon more closely associated with historians beginning in the 90s and forward. Relativism generally is associated with a tendency to avoid giving definitive meaning to terms. Nirenberg’s type or relativism is deployed specifically to explore cultures and the way in which they work. This type of relativism says that times and places determine the meaning of ideas, and that in order to understand the past we must approach the meanings in their own terms. The purpose of this type of relativism is to see how ideas are constructed and the way that they emerge, and have specific historical functions. Kamen, in contrast, has a tendency to take the meaning of terms for granted and to base their studies on more “concrete” foundations – for example demographic data and other quantitative material – in order to establish whether certain phenomenon (such as race) was widespread or not. Nirenberg’s work, on the other hand, puts more of an emphasis not on whether or not things are true in some absolute sense, but rather what ideas and concepts meant to the people that made use of or were affected by them.

Each historian that we have assessed has taken a completely distinct and individual perspective on the issue of race, and its implications in medieval and early modern Spain. Américo Castro, could be characterized as moralistic in his outlook on history, for example, ultimately dismisses the notion that race is of any relevance, yet switches terms that supposedly
describe the discrimination present in pre-modern Spain by labeling Jews, Muslims and Christians as “castes.” Though considered a liberal thinker for his time, his mentality and perspective regarding the Jewish “caste” oftentimes adheres to anti-Semitic notions that were commonly accepted at the time in which he was writing.

When one also takes into consideration the historical context in which he lived, during the Franco regime, it is evident that he was a product of his environment. Franco, as a fascist, was interested in creating and disseminating an image of Spaniard as “pure” and “righteous.” While historians such as Castro and Sanchez-Albornoz both opposed to the fascist regime under Franco, they, like Francoist scholars, both ultimately supported essentialistic claims of the ideal Spaniard. Sanchez-Albornoz maintained that Spaniards were a cultural product of the elimination of Muslim and Jewish cultures. For him, the expurgation of Muslims and Jews had created an unscathed Spaniard as a product of the Visigoths and other Christians. Castro, on the other hand, was making an equally essentialistic argument, but with a different conclusion. In his studies, he finds that strands of Jewish and Muslim influence remain within the culture and society of Spain, thus giving rise to a tripartite essence of the Spaniard – a convivencia of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. His belief is evident in the following statement, “El conjunto formado por cristianos, morros y judíos, la interacción de esos tres sectores entre ellos, no es ninguna tesis, es una evidencia.”

Kamen on the other hand is less focused on the meaning of race per se – he assumes that the reader already has a clear understanding of the term. Rather, he emphasizes social impact and institutionalization of limpieza. Rather than redefine and dismiss raza, Kamen makes a

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distinction between anti-Semitism – which he considers inherent within Iberian society – and racism which he claims had its foundations built in concepts of honor and chivalry. His goal ultimately is not to parse concepts of race and discriminatory behavior but to question the validity of the “black legend.” He hopes to undermine the conception of Inquisitorial Spain as a period marked by rampant racism, a society dominated by antisemitism and hatred. His approach methodology seek to completely invalidate the idea as a myth, as opposed someone like. By contrast, Nirenberg studies the manner in which the concept of race arose, and how it affected the society in which it was established.

Nirenberg’s approach takes a look at the evolution of racism as an idea – how it came to be understood and accepted by the Medieval Spaniards – and how it was applied as a social practice. Nirenberg’s criticism of historians rises from the tendency he perceived they had of wanting to compartmentalize and categorize ideas and people. In an attempt to distance himself from this tendency, Nirenberg is more interested in the way in which the Jews, Christians and Muslims related to each other, while attempting not to draw any sweeping conclusions about their character – what we defined as “essentialization.”

While historians build and construct new ideas and way to understand limpieza and race in the past, it is evident that we wrestle with difficulties that are by no means unique, for we continue to strive to add something new to the problem of classifying and identifying groups, as is our sociological tendency.

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Bibliography

*Americo Castro Honored.* On behalf of: The South Central Modern Languages Association:
  


