Review – Spain

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KOLDO CASLA, MAY 24 2024

Spain: The Trials & Triumphs of a Modern European Country
By Michael Reid
Yale University Press, 2023

Michael Reid's book begins with this remark from the 19th century English travel writer Richard Ford: "Nothing gives more pain to Spaniards than seeing volume after volume written on themselves and their country by foreigners…" That's where Reid leaves it, but Ford goes on: "… who have only rapidly glanced at one-half of the subject, and that half the one of which they are the most ashamed, and consider the least worth notice."

Spain's international image has not benefited from much subtlety over the course of history. Stanley Payne roughly summarises the typical labels that have been put on Spain by foreigners: Cruel, bloodthirsty, sadistic and destructive in the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century; militarily weak, ignorant, lazy and unproductive in the second half of the 17th century and the 18th century; culturally picturesque and romantic but of little political relevance in the 19th century; and a combination of all of the above in the 20th century (*Spain: A Unique History*, 2011, p.5).

Besides sun, beach, and cold beers on a terrace, prejudices about Spaniards' arrogance and proneness to fight with cudgels Goya-style still abound on international media. As a fun exercise, I challenge the reader to find a NYT piece about Spain that does not link current news with the Civil War (1936-39) and Franco's dictatorship (1939-75). Thankfully, international coverage of Spain has become more sophisticated in recent years, and some very good books are being written by masterful vivisectionists of Spanish politics. Reid's book is one of them. Reid observes Spain from the unique vantage point of the outsider within. He lives in Madrid, and knows the country perfectly well. Among multiple other roles, he was Spain correspondent for The Economist between 2016 and 2021.

The book covers a wide range of key topics to make sense of Spanish politics in the last four decades: The constitutional arrangement of the 1970s, the tensions between centre and periphery primarily involving the Basque Country and Catalonia, the ups and downs of the monarchy, historical memory about Franco's rule, gender equality, ETA's terror, the ordeal of the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity that followed, the *indignados* movement of the last decade, and the rise of the far right in the last lustrum. Reid portrays the time between 1975 and 2000 as a "golden age" in Spain's history. By contrast, in the last two decades, the "shadows [have] all but obscured the sun" (p.12).

In my opinion, Reid idealises the transition of the 1970s and the decades that followed—a tendency that, quite frankly, is not at all uncommon among boomers whose mid-life coincided with that time. Not only was this the period in which ETA committed most of its crimes, but also when the Spanish state sponsored terrorism against suspected ETA members on both sides of the French-Spanish border (1983-87). It is also the time of missed opportunities to develop a strong welfare state and a well-resourced public housing stock, a topic I devote half a chapter to in my own book. Moreover, the last quarter of the 20th century saw rampant corruption and political incompetence in central government and many regions, the central topic of Paul Preston's *A People Betrayed* (2020). Although Spain's economy boomed comparatively speaking, it did so on the basis of two pillars: tourism and housing developments, both of which would prove to be economically and environmentally unsustainable.

Spaniards overcame enormous difficulties in the 1970s. The transition to democracy may not have been fair or just, but it worked. The 1978 constitution and the transition to democracy were, with all their limitations, two of the best things that happened to Spain in the 20th century. But we are in the 21st century now. The impediments to democracy in the 1970s were political and man-made. Those who placed the barriers, the men leading the dictatorship and justifying it in the aftermath, were never held accountable. While it may have been functional, there was nothing exemplary about Spain's transition, and people would do well to avoid self-complacency.

Reid is critical of Catalan and Basque nationalism and pro-independence sentiment. He applies Hobsbawm's (1983) notion of the "invention of tradition" to Catalonia (2023, p.61). Spain, however, seems to be taken as a given, as if it were somehow an immutable reality. In fact, *all* nations are invented, or socially constructed if you prefer. They are "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), and this includes Spain, as well as the idea of the Basque Country and Catalonia as nations. As Hobsbawm himself observed in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, "nationalism comes before nations; nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around" (1992, p.10).

Last April, the two Basque nationalist parties (PNV-EAJ and EH Bildu) obtained their best result in history—a combined two thirds of the votes cast—even though self-determination and independence were barely mentioned at all in the campaign. The following month, both the Spanish centre-left (PSC-PSOE) and the right and far right (PP and Vox) obtained their best results in years at the expense of the nationalists parties (Junts, ERC and CUP), which, if taken together, suffered a heavy defeat in an election defined by low turnout.

The question of the nation is a recurrent theme in Spanish politics. It comes and goes like the Guadiana River in Andalusia (an expression, I admit, only Spaniards or people very familiar with the country will understand). Spanish politics since around 2010 has been a reminder that the 1978 constitutional fitting of the territories was a ceiling for some—in the centre—but a floor for others—particularly, though not exclusively, in Catalonia and the Basque Country. This is an eminently political question that affects national identities as well as less symbolic but more practical issues related to fiscal policy, distribution of resources, and public investment. It is a political question that will not be *resolved*, in the sense that it will not end, because it is part of what makes Spain different. It is a question that can only be dealt with—or "brought along", "*conllevanza*" as Ortega put it.

The disagreement and uncertainty about the number of nations in Spain—one, three, more?—need not be a weakness. A disagreement can actually be transformed into a source of strength, turning uncertainty into diversity, something to be proud of. In a democratic society, disagreements are not the problem; the problem lies in how societies and their leaders deal with them.

Reid writes that "Spain has served as a mirror, an often distorted one, onto which observers have projected their own visions and fantasies" (2023, p.3). That is indeed the essence of *Esperpento*, a literary style that emerged in the early 20th century. In *Bohemian Lights*, a play from the 1920s, Ramón del Valle-Inclán makes Max Estrella reflect in his last breaths: "The tragic sense of Spanish life can only be rendered through an aesthetic that is systematically deformed… Spain is a grotesque deformation of the European civilization… The most beautiful images on a concave mirror are absurd." Let's love the reflection in front of a concave mirror, because when you hold up a concave mirror to idols, the deformed image you receive is their true nature.

About the author:

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