

Nineteenth Century Spain: A New History

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At a time when the study of 19th-century history in general is becoming an increasingly marginal pursuit, writing a synthetic volume about Spain—which has never enjoyed much scholarly attention—may seem optimistic. Nevertheless, as Mark Lawrence himself suggests in this latest addition to the Routledge/Canada Blanch Studies on Contemporary Spain, it deserves a greater share of the growing interest in the country's modern history.

It is a formidable undertaking. Not least because most readers will have little familiarity with even the most significant of events, let alone the resultant historiographical debates. Dr Lawrence sensibly begins with a comprehensive introduction to both. This overview, without compare in English, will be particularly useful to those making their first foray into the study of modern Spain.

Explanation does tend to trump argument. This is no doubt partly because determining the nature of 19th-century Spain whilst reconciling a heterogeneity rarely acknowledged by historians, is fraught with difficulty. Despite Spain's 19th century being arguably more successful—certainly less destructive—than its 20th, it has a 'calamitous reputation for generations of Spaniards' (p. 189). Only time will tell whether this work can rehabilitate this reputation, but it is an illuminating and thought-provoking attempt. English-speaking non-specialists will be particularly glad of its historiographical detail. Although not intended to be the last word on the subject, it is both an ideal starting point and a reference to which specialists will return again and again.

After a few general notes on the 18th century, the analysis begins judiciously with the war of 1793-1795 and its aftermath. The author of a number of works of military history, Lawrence is generous with his description of the fighting but less so with his exploration of abortive popular risings in La Rioja and Valencia. This is a shame as such events, if better known, might attract more students. The history of the period has long been concerned with high politics, and this work only partially breaks with this tradition. Although the precarious nature of political power made Spain more vulnerable to Napoleonic intervention, it was structural conditions which enabled it. Dr Lawrence does consider these, namely that Spain was caught between France and Britain, and that the state was in desperate need of money, but it is individuals (rather than what they represented) which tend to dominate.

As Lawrence explains, the real significance of the *Dos de Mayo* 'uprising' against French occupation is cultural, rather than political. However, his claim that the popular risings which followed were not motivated by patriotism (p. 16), rather by the defence of 'hearth and home' (p. 18), could have been interrogated further as the two do not seem mutually exclusive. The resultant war devastated hearth and home, and dragged Spain into abject poverty. As might be expected from such an authority, Dr Lawrence's handling of this and the Peninsula War more generally is excellent. This is one area which has enjoyed some attention in English, and Lawrence brings some much needed nuance to the often-polarised debate about the popular nature of the *guerrilla* (pp. 20-21).

During the Peninsular War, Spain was unique in experiencing 'two concurrent processes of political reform' (p. 30), and Lawrence does a particularly good job of explaining why neither continued after the country's liberation in 1814. Nevertheless, his verdict on the 1812 Cádiz Constitution and the liberal regime is on the harsh side. Following the work of Gregorio Alonso and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, he emphasises the continuity of state-building projects. However, it also marked a radical change in political participation, even if this was clearly limited by wartime realities and its reinforcement of existing local power structures (p. 25). It provided Spaniards with their first experience of electoral participation and, significantly, a model for a future liberal state.

It was this model which was quickly implemented after the liberal revolution of 1820, which forced Ferdinand VIII to relinquish absolutism. He had been restored to the throne in 1814 and, riding a wave of supposed anti-liberal enthusiasm, revoked the 1812 Constitution. This enthusiasm—widespread though it may have been—was a chimera, and the perception, both at home and abroad, was that Ferdinand had managed to snatch defeat for Spain from the jaws of victory. Lawrence recreates this well, but political grievances played more of a role in 1820 than he allows; to borrow from George Rudé, military disloyalty was 'a social and political rather than a military question.' ⁽¹⁾ The revolutionaries only unveiled plans to adopt the 1812 Constitution at the last minute, but it surely does not follow that they were motivated solely by professional grievances (p. 39), especially given the early socially-liberal measures they implemented once in power (p. 41).

Sadly, there has been almost no recent scholarship on the three years of liberal rule which followed the 1820 revolution. Short of conducting further research, Dr Lawrence's treatment is the best that can be hoped for, even if he sees political discord among the liberals as indicative of the weakness rather than the strength of the public sphere. He also argues that the remarkably successful army levy of October 1822 had nothing to do with 'the popularity of the regime', or 'patriotism in the face of the threat of foreign invasion.' It seems unlikely, however, that fifty-thousand men reluctantly chose to join the army only because they did not wish to serve in the National Militia (p. 47).

In fairness, it is difficult to say how ordinary Spaniards felt about the liberal regime. It is true that they did not rise in large numbers to oppose the French invasion, but a reliance on contemporary sources which suggest that the nation 'hated' the government is not all that convincing either (pp. 48-49). Some further exploration of the examples given by Gil Novales and Pedro Rújula, relegated to a footnote (p. 60), might suggest an element of historical manipulation by the king. The relentless propaganda of his later reign,

'pathologising the people as a demagogue-prone mob' reinforced the chaotic nature of liberal rule (p. 51), even among the liberals themselves (p. 56). Yet, as Lawrence demonstrates with lucidity and succinctness, the threat to the restored regime was as likely to come from conservatives as progressives (pp. 53-57). In a sense, both indicate a broader politicisation, and it would have been worth building briefly on what is done here by exploring this more from the bottom up (p. 57).

Historians of 20th-century Spain may take issue with the idea that the First Carlist War was 'the country's most decisive conflict in modern history' (p. 63), but it is a suggestive one. It was certainly more significant than its historiography in English would suggest. Dr Lawrence undoubtedly has a masterful understanding of the war's detail, but how far he manages to simplify this for a non-specialist audience is less clear. The Carlists did manage to gain and hold significant territory, but this was almost exclusively liminal and in the rural milieu. Military victory was never—and could not have been—converted into political power. Even the Gómez expedition, which managed to capture large swathes of the country, could only hold its urban gains temporarily (pp. 76-77). Instead, the real battle was the proxy war taking place in the cities, still mostly under liberal rule but with substantial numbers of political Carlists (p. 66).

Although a Carlist military victory was more or less unthinkable, liberal hegemony was not complete until 1840. Nevertheless, Dr Lawrence's discussion of the gradual liberal reforms of the 1830s (pp. 67-69) further emphasises that the nature of the state would be decided in Madrid, rather than in the battlefields of the rural north west. The irony was that, in the broader debate between the centralisation and devolution of state power which continued until at least 1874, the Carlists and the radicals were on the same side, albeit for different reasons. Lawrence skilfully unravels the layers of complexity, particularly in relation to the Church and the brutal nature of the conflict (both real and imagined by those in the cities), which meant the two opposition groups would remain largely divided (pp. 69-73). He also explains something of the failure of penetration of the liberal state. Ultimately the liberals, who importantly retained the institutional loyalty of the army and the Church, won both the war and the battle for the nature of the state. So, when the Carlists left Estrella on their grandly named Royal Expedition in 1837, they had already lost (p. 80). If Don Carlos was 'dumbfounded' by his new commander's decision to sue for peace two years later (p. 87), then he ought not to have been.

Considering the bloody nature of the combat, the post-war settlement was notably conciliatory, probably because the liberal state had never been in any real danger. Nevertheless, as Dr Lawrence explains, much had changed, particularly in terms of property ownership (p. 78). Although some progress was made in creating a free market in land, and there were some changes in the structure of landholding, these were uneven and incomplete. They also did little to address the grievances of those who had supported the Carlists (p. 94). The other major change was that the war heralded the birth of praetorian politics, though in a less malevolent form than would reoccur in the 20th century (p. 88). Both these phenomena served to expand the local elite and, with the restoration of *progresista* government in 1840, there was a new coherence to progressive politics. But this was not to last. As Lawrence deftly explains, devolution of political and coercive power brought with it a loss of accountability, leading to prolificacy and internecine squabbling (pp. 92-93). Caught in a decreasing space between the radicals, who made significant advances in the municipal elections of December 1841 (p. 95), and the resurgent *moderados*, the *progresistas* increasingly resorted to force to maintain their influence.

The 1842-1843 uprisings in Barcelona are covered in detail and, importantly, are couched in terms of the national scale of their aims. The Carlist past of some insurgents is mentioned briefly (pp. 97-98). This relationship could have been explored in more detail, either here or later when it is mentioned again (pp. 119, 158). Nevertheless, Lawrence does explain the shifting nature of political alliances as the question of public order became increasingly central to political discourse (p. 100). On the surface, little changed between the fall of the *progresistas* in 1844 and the 1868 Revolution (p. 108), but this interpretation belies a multi-temporality in the relationship between state and people in the period. Whilst the model of the former remained largely static, the latter changed beyond recognition. Thus, a state and political system which might, in 1844, have seemed advanced by European standards was, by 1868, hopelessly unfit for purpose.

Dr Lawrence's treatment of the revolutionary events of 1848 in Spain is archetypally unkind, but he makes novel points about their broad geographical spread (p. 117) and their social base (p. 118). The important links between Carlism and radicalism are given more space than is typical (p. 119), and the effect of the easing of the grain crisis is rightfully highlighted. His discussion of the state response is disappointingly orthodox, emphasising the 'terror' of the repression (p. 116), when in fact it was more measured and more multi-faceted. (2) Neither the agility of the state apparatus (for example the Civil Guard) nor the government's programme of public works get the attention they might, and the doctrine that the 1854 Revolution was Spain's 1848 is left unchallenged. This is particularly frustrating considering the promising examination of the structural effects of 1848 (pp. 121-122).

The two years of *progresista* rule which followed 1854 were something of a disappointment to those who had taken to the barricades. Yet, as Lawrence shows (building on the work of Isabel Burdiel), that the regime survived those two years is an achievement, considering it was never hegemonic (p. 126). The Liberal Union party, which won the 1858 elections, started promisingly and, as this astute analysis demonstrates, made remarkable progress on the international stage (pp. 127-132). His emphasis on the civilian nature of opposition—including during the 1862 Loja insurgency—is an important one (pp. 133-135), but there is little about the genuine popular support that the government enjoyed, at least before it lurched towards authoritarianism to deal with the democratic threat. Lawrence manages to deftly simplify the extraordinarily complicated path from the 1868 Revolution to the Restoration in 1874, and he justly emphasises the excitement and new ideas in both the domestic and colonial milieus (pp. 147-150). In a way, though, the problem remained the same: regional and local differences could not be accommodated by the political centre as they continued to be viewed primarily as a threat to public order.

Internal division is often cited as the explanation for the failure of the democratic regime, and it is here too, albeit in a more nuanced way than is usually the case, but this is still to somewhat confuse cause and effect. As the book makes clear, an alternative model to centralising liberalism had never been possible in Spain. So it should have been no surprise that, when faced with conceptualising such an alternative, there was little coherence to the discourse. The resultant 'democratic monarchy' was a compromise that pleased no one (p. 153) and which pushed moderates towards the extremes of their factions. It also perpetuated the conflation of politics and the political system, which had by then already become little more than a tool for maintaining power. The proclamation of the First Republic in February 1873 was widely celebrated (p. 155), in part because it seemed that Spain finally had a system which could accommodate discord. However, the abstention of opposition parties in the May elections seriously undermined the legitimacy of the victorious radical government and, with it, 19th-century Spain's last chance at a functioning democracy. The related extra-electoral suppression of parliamentary Carlism (p. 156)—a vastly popular movement more of a threat to the state than Carlist military action ever was—would have been worth exploring more.

The three conflicts faced by the First Republic garner much attention and the analysis is comprehensive and nuanced. As Dr Lawrence explains, although they were significant distractions from the urgent business of government, neither the renewed Carlist rising nor the Cantonalist rebellion presented an existential threat to the regime. Indeed, Presidents Salmerón and Castelar were making progress with reconciliation with the Cantonalists. This makes Pavia's military coup all the more difficult to understand, and it would have been

worth exploring this in more detail. The Ten Years' War in Cuba was a different thing entirely, and this did significantly undermine the Republic. It particularly affected the regime's popularity among the heavily conscripted poorer classes and lessened its ability to face down Pavia's coup. However, the Peace of Zanjón, finally agreed in 1878, probably owed more to a further five years of exhausting and destructive war than to a 'more efficient' restoration government (p. 160).

Often juxtaposed to the 'chaos' of the First Republic—not least by its architect Antonio Cánovas del Castillo (p. 165)—the stable but oligarchic and corrupt Restoration regime has received generally benevolent treatment from historians (p. 164). In some ways, it corresponded very closely to the *moderado* system before the 1848 Revolution with a very restricted franchise, a partially successful demilitarisation of the public sphere (p. 171) and a conscious increase in state building. Reliance on government-appointed local political leaders, now known as *caciques*, became more overt, but was really a more extreme version of an existing phenomenon. Dr Lawrence is right to highlight that the system allowed most political forces periodic access to power (p. 165), but this was uneven and, worse, essentially arbitrary. Whilst the Restoration system was remarkably long lasting, with its reliance on vested interests (p. 169), it could not be a vehicle for much-needed reform and led to widespread apathy. It was in this environment that groups such as anarchists, socialists and regional nationalists began to win support.

20th-century historians familiar with the Restoration system tend to take it as a model for 19th-century Spain, whereas it was a pastiche. Lawrence shows that the sham constitutionalism (p. 170), the religiosity (pp. 173-175) and the problems of competing regional nationalisms (p. 170) were either new or much exaggerated incarnations of earlier phenomena. For a relatively short study, six pages (pp. 176-182) on the Cuban conflict might be considered excessive in the context of the 19th century, particularly at the expense of a more detailed analysis of the Restoration regime's later domestic failures. Nevertheless, it remains a very authoritative and readable account. It is a little disappointing that the concept of *Hispanidad* only makes its first appearance at this late stage (p. 181) when it merits inclusion from at least the 1860s.

Overall, though, Dr Lawrence should be congratulated in bringing clarity and interest to this neglected period, and the work should be strongly recommended to any serious scholar of modern Spain.

Notes

1. George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A study of popular disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (London, 1995 [1964]), p.266.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. This was particularly the case in Barcelona, where the captain general, Manuel Pavia, instituted support for industry and work programmes for the unemployed, see J. Fuster Sobrepere, *Barcelona i l'estat centralista: Indústria i política ala dècada moderada (1843-1854)* (Vic, 2006), pp.114-116.
[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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