Catalonia, Columbus and King

GABRIEL PAQUETTE

Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga
THE REINVENTION OF SPAIN
Nation and identity since democracy
239pp. Oxford University Press. £55 (US $99).
978 0 19 920667 4

Spain's national identity has long been troubling to both Spanish and foreign observers. From the late fifteenth century, foreign writers frequently oscillated between derogatory and dismissive descriptions. On the one hand, they fashioned a "black legend" concerning Spain's conduct in the conquest of the New World and its apparent aspiration for a universal monarchy in Europe. Gibbon's 1776 description of Spain's history as stained by "gloomy pride, rapacious avarice, and unrelenting cruelty" is a testament to the pervasiveness of this representation. On the other hand, foreign commentators produced a comparatively benign, if frivolous, image of Spain as a timeless, delightfully languorous, backward land of Don Quixote, bullfights and zarzuela. This image of Spain enchanted, and was reproduced by, writers from Southey to Hemingway. Between these two extremes, of course, lies a near-universal admiration for Spain's cultural achievements. Yet a broader perception of the country as fiercely resistant to political and cultural modernity, clinging proudly to tradition, with its back self-consciously, perhaps haughtily, turned away from Europe, somehow lingers in the popular imagination.

Such a distorted image ignores Spain's occasional vanguard role in the march of European civilization. The contemporary political usage of the word "liberal", for example, was bequeathed by the Cortes of Cádiz. Its 1812 Constitution far outstripped all existing charters in its broad extension of suffrage and declaration of equality before the law. Spain was also perhaps the first European state to experience the psychocultural, political and economic effects of decolonization, having been shorn of its last colonies – Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines – by an increasingly rapacious United States of America at the start of the twentieth century, presaging the national soul-searching that Britain and France would endure half a century later. Moreover, it could be argued that Europe's first sustained resistance to Fascism occurred during the Spanish Civil War. These three episodes, and others, tell against older ideas about Spain's purportedly marginal place in Europe's history.

Of course, the perception of Spain as a bastion of tradition derives, at least to some extent, from literary self-fashioning, reinforced by reality. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the writer Azorín expressed ambivalence towards a Spanish countryside that seemed to ignore the siren calls of industrialization, secularism and newfangled political ideas which had seduced the rest of Europe. The Spanish Left, in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, would seize and elaborate on the trope of "failure", claiming that Spain's efforts to modernize had been abortive, resulting in its deviation from the developmental path travelled by its neighbours. Later, under Franco's dictatorship (1939–75), Spain was exalted as an "exceptional" nation, built on the bedrock of religious, linguistic and cultural homogeneity, imbued with a proselytizing mission.

The demise of the regime in 1975 and the advent of democracy, enshrined in the 1978 Constitution, led to a general thaw, reactivating older political dynamics and unleashing new forces. In *The Reinvention of Spain*, Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga identify and analyse the new identities, varieties of historical revisionism, and emergent political institutions that have transformed Spain over the past three decades. Francoist conceptions of a monocultural Spain have been discarded. Political discussion is now heavily coloured by regional nationalism, linguistic and cultural pluralism, and constitutional patriotism: Spain has been "reinvented" as democratic, modern and European.

At the heart of *The Reinvention of Spain* lies the argument that the richness of Spanish political culture derives primarily from the challenge posed by peripheral nationalism. Basque, Catalan and Galician demands for devolution have reinvigorated debates about Spain's cohesion, the function and limitations of the central state, and the role of citizenship in a culture preoccupied with the differential rights possessed by each "historic community" and region. Balfour and Quiroga rightly indicate that Basque and Catalan striving for greater autonomy has a long history, dating to the early modern period when Spain was a "composite" monarchy. It sheltered numerous kingdoms under a single flag, each of which enjoyed asymmetrical bundles of legal rights, political privileges and fiscal exemptions. Such a hotchpotch conspired to frustrate Madrid's centralizing ambitions and was the target of spasmodic assaults from the eighteenth century until the transition to democracy thirty years ago.

After 1975, peripheral nationalists were embraced, with justification, as comrades in the long struggle against Fascism, and as indispensable partners in the transition to democracy. This solidarity legitimated claims made by the proponents of political devolution. Democratization and decentralization, therefore, became inextricably linked. The 1978 Constitution, which declared Spain to be a nation composed of nationalities and regions, legally sanctioned devolutionary measures. In the 1980s and early 90s, however, the creation of regional mini-states led many observers, on both the Right and the Left, to fear that such radical federalism, if continued, would ultimately precipitate national disintegration. In the Basque country, for example, the regional government enjoys unprecedented control over tax collection, local councils, and the education and health systems.

In order to counteract the mounting political and economic strength of the regions, some political writers endorse the idea of "constitutional patriotism". They argue that Spain is a nation of citizens, not regions or nationalities, and that the increasing asymmetry of institutions, rights and privileges is unacceptable and contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of the post-Franco settlement.

Perhaps one of the most interesting phenomena described by Balfour and Quiroga is the swift rise of dual identities in Spain. In Catalonia, for example, the Catalan language has been prioritized in the educational and judicial systems as well as in public administration and private business. Yet a paltry 12 per cent of Catalans polled in 2005 supported independence from Spain, and 47 per cent considered Catalonia to be a region, not a nation. The entrenchment of dual identities, and acceptance of such pluralism, was perhaps best symbolized by the entry of the King and Queen into Barcelona's Olympic stadium in 1992 to the strain of the Catalan national hymn, *Els Segadors*. Overlaying these identities, though not supplanting them, is a new identification with Europe – confirmed by the referendum on the European Union Constitution (now the EU Treaty) in 2005.

But although Spain has been "reinvented" as modern and European, the residue of the past appears to linger on. For instance, Balfour and Quiroga never account for the monarchy's status as Spain's most popular institution. Nor do they explain the retention of October 12 (Columbus Day) as Spain's national holiday – a stark reminder of the country's imperial past. The refusal of all political parties to contemplate the ceding of the North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla to Morocco, and the overwhelming public support for the occupation, in 2002, of the islet of Perejil off the North African coast, suggest that the idea of *Reconquista* still occupies a prominent place in Spain's political imagination.

There are also new challenges that could undermine Spain's recent evolution. Immigration has increased eightfold since 1996. The integration of these newcomers, mainly from Latin America and North Africa, who now account for 8 per cent of the population, will severely test the malleability of Spanish identity. Furthermore, the decade of robust growth enjoyed by Spain's economy is expected to slow rather abruptly in the next five years. How the country copes with these fresh challenges will reveal the extent of its "reinvention".