

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations

**Review Number:**

1260

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 31 May, 2012

**Author:**

Jose Álvarez-Junco

**ISBN:**

9780719075797

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£90.00

**Pages:**

432pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Phillip Williams

Perhaps the central theme in the history of Spain has been whether it can be considered a European country, or whether its unique historical trajectory qualifies it for a status as a marginal case, a fringe member of the continental club. For foreigners as contrasting as Voltaire and Ernest Hemingway, Spain was different: having once been the hegemonic power in Europe, its 'absolutism', imperialism and adherence to a brand of fanatical Catholicism condemned it to the periphery in the course of the 17th century; it was, wrote Hemingway, the one country where the Reformation had had no impact.

The question of Spanish otherness looms throughout José Álvarez-Junco's study of *Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations*. It is a work of enormous scope and range, and the English translation will be of enormous benefit to students, academics and the reading public. While focused on the debate on nationhood during the 19th century, it shades into a general study of how or why *España* developed as it did during both the early modern and modern periods. The essential thesis is that 19th-century Spain was not characterized by a sort of fervent nationalism of the sort that could be said have pre-shadowed the Franco dictatorship; rather the precise opposite was the case: Spain was marked by the relative failure of the nationalist programme. The absence of a fervent nationalism among the masses can in part be attributed to the commitment of much conservative opinion to the Catholic Church, which as an institution existed almost as a rival to the state,

especially in the field of education. The rural populations of Andalusia and Castile continued to identify themselves according to regional and confessional, rather than national, criteria: peasants did not become Spaniards. Moreover there seemed to be no prospect of them doing so. They lacked the cultural or intellectual tools necessary to adapt to the challenge of modernity and when forced to confront the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the early 20th century they readily threw themselves into the programme of ultra-nationalist Catholic conservatism of the 1930s.

The author's viewpoint or methodology places emphasis upon ideas and political developments. There is a great deal here on historical interpretations, theatre and poetry, and there are fascinating descriptions of nationalist archaeology, science and anthropology. In his 'Introduction', Professor Álvarez-Junco makes it clear that he will not 'aspire to the heights of what was once pretentiously dubbed 'total history''. Reference to social and economic developments are 'not essential tools of analysis of this topic'. Culture is the driving force of history, or at least of the parts of history which gave birth to Spanish identity.

In many regards the awareness of a distinctive Spanish identity began during the Enlightenment. The *lumières* or *ilustrados* saw the country as representative of all that was wrong in *ancien régime* Europe. The Enlightenment attack created something of a problem for the liberals, whose attempts to describe and propagate an *españolismo* could hardly call upon the almost entirely negative image of the country presented by Montesquieu or Voltaire. The solution at which they arrived was that the true character of the Spanish people had been manifest in the Middle Ages. During this period the values of liberty, constitutionalism and co-existence had defined the various kingdoms of Spain, as Jew, Christian and Moor lived side-by-side. This Golden Age was destroyed by the Habsburgs, a foreign dynasty ('the Austrians?'). Having defeated the 'national' rebellion of the *Comuneros* in 1521, Charles V strove to impose the writ of the Counter Reformation not only on the Spanish, but also to on other peoples of Europe. In doing so, he and his successors exhausted the economic and demographic resources of Castile, leading to its decline and marginalization.

National sentiment in the modern sense began in 1808 with the rebellion against Napoleonic France. The call to arms was decisive and successful, although Álvarez-Junco takes great care in balancing his interpretation of the motivation of the combatants (for example, pp. 12, 205). The problem lies in determining whether the war against Bonaparte was a 'War of Independence?', as liberal nationalists in subsequently claimed, or a holy war, a defence of religion against the godlessness of the French and their Enlightenment doctrines, as Napoleon himself believed. Throughout the first half of the 19th century conservative thinkers, writers and statesmen held steadfastly to the latter argument and viewed the call of the nation with profound suspicion. In any case after 1814 nationalism ceased to hold the centre stage, as the restoration of the House of Bourbon and the subsequent Carlist wars ensured that political realities were determined by the dispute over exactly what sort of Catholic royal absolutism would prevail. It was not until the time of the 'War of Africa' (1859-60), a partially-successful imperialist venture in Morocco, that some sort of consensus began to emerge, as right-wing opinion shifted towards an acceptance of the reality of the nation (to view 'reality through the prism of nationalism?', p.275). By this point the liberals had ceded much ground, having given up calls for local democracy, freedom of the press and parliamentary control over the executive. Greater consensus there may have been, but the common ground upon which conservative and liberal met was considerably to the right of the Constitution proclaimed at Cadiz in 1812.

Numerous problems, limitations or restrictions continued to affect the call to nationhood. The state proved unable to establish and maintain an effective educational system. The Church, in contrast, turned out to be much more successful than the state in setting up and running schools. When it suited them to do so, Church schools taught in the Catalan or Basque languages. Moreover, methods of 'nation making' that were effective elsewhere in 19th-century Europe stalled in Spain. It proved peculiarly difficult to invent tradition, as the Church had already seized such a large part of the festive calendar and secured many of the major civic spaces for monuments to the martyrs, saints and apostles. Moreover, the impoverished government was unable to exploit foreign and imperial adventures in order to feed or engineer a patriotic frenzy; those campaigns that were attempted were of limited scope and impact; 'jingoism' remained very much a concern of the educated urban minorities, and even the catastrophic defeats at Cuba in 1898 elicited little popular

comment, let alone outrage. Those who did identify themselves as Spaniards had to define themselves by reference to glorious events that had taken place in the distant past: this was a 'retrospective nationalism' in José María Jover's phrase, whose final consequence was to increase frustration at present-day circumstances and so sow a sense of despair and defeatism among the progressive groups.

Two points of criticism can be made, while in one respect it might be possible to extend the range of the argument advanced by Professor Álvarez-Junco. The first is that for all the perils of 'historicism' or teleology, 'total history' offers interpretations whose relevance to the emergence 'or non-emergence' of Spanish national feeling can hardly be ignored. The second is that Álvarez-Junco accepts so much of the Enlightenment case against the Church in Spain, that he isolates the confessional experience of Spanish peasants from those of their counterparts in the rest of western Europe over the previous three or four centuries. Here the author's fundamental attachment to the ideas of the *ilustrados* has, perhaps, led him to accept a rather one-dimensional appraisal of the Council of Trent and Spanish history in the early modern period. While this observation might have primary relevance to the chapters on the Habsburg and early Bourbon eras, rather than to the central thesis on the 1800s, it does refer back, one again, to the central question of why the development of Spain was, or at least appeared to be, so different to that of other European countries.

The extremely critical view of early modern Catholicism is perhaps a slightly dated one (see, for instance, pp. 206-8): the faith is presented as a collective culture, one which served to bind its illiterate congregations into a sort of intellectual and cultural conformity ('not so much a *religion* as a *culture*'). In turn this outlook sometimes leads him to the brink of an extremely bleak view of Spanish cultural achievement (p. 140) and even to coming close to accepting the 19th-century liberal narrative of the Habsburg despotism (pp. 215-17). On the role and impact of the Catholic faith three points can be made: first, that there must be some doubt about the efficacy of the Church (in general) or the Tribunal of the Holy Office (in particular) to have had the effect on 'popular culture' which was subsequently ascribed to it by Enlightenment thinkers; second, that similar methods or forms of 'thought police' existed in all early modern states; third, that the general consensus among historians is that the Counter Reformation aimed to break down the old communal and sacramental forms of worship 'in other words, to ensure that its faith was not simply a culture, a mechanical conveyor of comfort to illiterate masses (as its critics alleged), but rather a religiosity of profound personal conviction. It is true that the means by which these reforms were implemented in Spain were unambiguous in their methods: as Álvarez-Junco notes, when the Inquisition threw Casanova in prison it was not doing much for the image of the country abroad. On the other hand the Venetian tourist may have presented a rather obvious target for the *inquisidores*, and the consensus among historians today would probably be that the Tribunal was, in fact, a rather uneven and ramshackle organization, which often became the tool for the prosecution of private grudges. It is probably safe to say that it was as much a reflection of society as a means of transforming it. Finally, it should be said that, as has long been recognised (see chapter seven), the characterization of the culture of early modern Spain as uniquely backward and intolerant invites some difficult questions when comparison is made with the witch-craze that took hold nearly elsewhere else in early modern Europe, or with the sort of spontaneous violence and popular massacres committed during the French Wars of Religion.

It is difficult, in these regards, to blame the Church for the peculiar historical development of Spain, or to isolate its aims from the central programmes of churches, both Catholic and Protestant, elsewhere in Central and Western Europe at the time. It would seem to be very hard to believe that the peasants of Valladolid or Soria were fundamentally different in outlook or 'mentality' to their counterparts in Lancaster or Brittany in the 16th or 17th centuries, although the interpretation given here is that the rural masses remained eternally the figures portrayed by Goya, villagers dedicated alternatively to bright festivals and dark ceremonies. Whether this is a reflection of historical realities or simply an indication that studies of 'popular culture' have not taken the same course in Spain as they have elsewhere is difficult to say. In any case, the possibility of change, adaptation or resistance is discounted; indoctrination is assumed. Again, a certain strand of liberal patriotic pessimism might be discerned here. Finally, there is a hint of contradiction in lamenting the extremely low levels of literacy in 19th-century Spain while simultaneously condemning the Church, which

was, by all accounts, by far the most effective provider of mass education.

The second point of criticism lies in discussing the birth of nationhood without taking into account social and economic realities. True to his word, Professor Álvarez-Junco leaves economics, demographics, geography and landscape well alone. Thus the explanation that seems most obvious – that the lack of nationalism was the direct consequence of the comparative economic underdevelopment of 19th-century Spain – is introduced only occasionally and sits slightly awkwardly with the tone, if not the content, of the core arguments (for instance on roads, p. 327). Yet it seems to make little sense to wonder how the peoples of Spain saw themselves without asking what sort of country they lived in. Grim material realities lurk beneath the surface of ‘the symbolic world’ – this artificial medium?. Thus one Catalan nationalist, Jaime Balmes, dismissed Madrid as ‘having no sea, no river, [existing] in the heart of a desert, with no industry, no life of its own’ (p. 367). The comparative scarcity of water has provided a fertile line of analysis for scholars of the medieval and early modern periods, in part because it sheds further light on the role of the great municipalities like Seville, Segovia and Zaragoza that controlled the access to streams, rivers and irrigation systems. Catalonia might prove a more concrete example. As Pierre Vilar demonstrated in one of the great works of ‘total history’, the exploitation of viticulture in the course of the 18th century would serve to drag the Catalans out of the poverty that had beset them in the early modern period and so set them on the path to prosperity. In turn, the acquisition of capital led to industrialization. Cadiz was another region that was able to exploit the *comercio marítimo* to sell its wines and fruits abroad. The economies of many other parts of Spain, however, were condemned by the geographical restraints that Balmes evoked in his (crude) polemic.

There is, as Álvarez-Junco warns, an enormous potential pitfall of pretentiousness when claiming to write ‘total history’; on the other hand, it has to be asked why the efforts of legions of patriotic poets, anthropologists, scientists, playwrights, *philosophes* and – it is painful to admit it – historians (!) had so little impact in forging a Spanish consciousness. A comparison with the sort of confident, assertive urban environment that ultimately loomed behind Linda Colley’s *Britons* or Simon Schama’s *Embarrassment of Riches* perhaps underlines the point: a critical ingredient in both was the perception of economic successes, as manifested in Hogarth’s comparison of John Bull and the emaciated Frenchman, or the fulsome breakfasts that helped to forge a sense of Dutch identity among classes whose economic interests might otherwise have cast them asunder. As countless visitors testified, breakfasts were not nearly as filling in Spain. When Manet visited the *Museo del Prado* in 1865, he complained that his stomach had suffered tortures in the long return voyage on terrible roads to Madrid. But Velázquez, he concluded, had been worth it.

Professor Álvarez-Junco shows that one of the limitations on the development of nationalism was the frailty of the army. In many other states, and most notably in France, the army served as a motor of national sentiment, a mechanism by which both to inculcate and to demonstrate ideals of equality and fraternity. Yet it proved impossible to establish a modern national army in Spain in the way that was achieved in other western countries, largely because the state simply did not have the resources necessary to do so, there was no immediate prospect of a war with European powers and the sons of the middle and upper classes were usually able to opt out of military service. The burden of fighting fell disproportionately on the lower classes, whose experience of the *ejército nacional* during the campaigns of the second half of the 19th century only served to feed their doubts about the national programme to whose defence it was dedicated. It was, said the radical left, a ‘blood tax’ levied on the poor.

This line of thinking might be extended back into the early modern period. It is becoming increasingly clear that the political history of the peninsula under the Habsburgs is not best understood in terms of absolutism and militarism. The apparent serenity of Habsburg and Bourbon rule throughout Spain in fact masked the functioning of a complex patchwork of regional liberties, immunities and freedoms, all of which served to curtail or moderate the power of the executive. Thus excellent recent ‘revisionist’ works by Sean Perrone and Aurelio Espinosa on the Castilian policies of Charles V (1516–56) have both underlined the extent to which the power and authority of the 16th century state were much less ‘absolute’ than the *ilustrados* imagined. Government was much more complex, being dependent upon a series of negotiations and

compromises with municipal and ecclesiastical bodies.

It could be argued that the problem for Spain under the Habsburgs and Bourbons was not that there was too much absolutism and militarism, but that there was far too little of it. The very reason why the Jews and (specifically) the Moriscos (the Moorish communities of Granada and Valencia) were perceived to be such a threat to the country was that the frontier between Spain and the Muslim world of North Africa was such a permeable one. The defence of this 'forgotten frontier' (see Andrew C. Hess's classic study (2)) fell almost entirely on the shoulders of militias, which were made up of gentlemen soldiers whose membership was dependent upon property or wealth qualifications. Like the officers or informants (*familiares*) of the Inquisition, these men served in order to gain a range of 'privileges, pre-eminences and immunities' ? in other words, to secure them exemptions from the demands and exactions of the state, not to increase them. The Moriscos were expelled in 1609<sup>14</sup>; but it is now clear that many of them made their way back to Spain; the 'state' was simply incapable of manning its frontiers. In the Habsburg period the regiments of crack troops, the famous (or infamous) *tercios*, were trained and garrisoned in the Monarchy's Italian fiefs and had to be ferried back to Catalonia or Cadiz in moments of emergency. The 18th century saw little change in this regard. In the early 18th century the entire state apparatus of soldiers and officials ran to no more than 30, 000 men.

This long-term perspective on the role of the military does, in fact, considerably strengthen and extend the interpretation advanced by Álvarez-Junco. In other words, if there was one country in Western Europe where militarism was not ingrained in the spirit of the people in 1800, 1850 or 1900, then it was Spain. That the country eventually ended up in 1939 with the *Caudillo de España* was an irony of history whose origins lie, fundamentally, in the circumstance of the rapid modernization after 1898, not in the history of the people over the previous four or five centuries. Indeed Franco's invasion from Morocco was the working out of a nightmare that had haunted Spain for many centuries about how a country of genteel soldiers, village militias and regional privileges might defend itself against the determined assault of professional military forces. In this respect Professor Álvarez-Junco's fine study may help to define a new paradigm: that 1939 was not the culmination of Spanish history over the previous three or four centuries; it was, in fact, the denial of them.

In conclusion Professor José Álvarez-Junco has written a work of tremendous scope and ambition which will interest all of those who take an interest in Spain and its history. Its engagement with central arguments and its thematic range will make it essential for many postgraduate courses ? it would be possible to base an entire module around it ? and it will be invaluable for many third-year undergraduate course that examine relatively broad themes or ideas. The general reader will find a great deal of interest in it, while it contributes a great deal to the theoretical debate about the evolution of national consciousness and identity, and the relationship between ideas and culture and the economic and geographical circumstances in which they flourish.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1260>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/18971>