

## Juan de Mariana and Early Modern Spanish Political Thought

**Review Number:**

647

**Publish date:**

Friday, 29 February, 2008

**Author:**

Harald Braun

**ISBN:**

9780754639626

**Date of Publication:**

2007

**Price:**

£55.00

**Pages:**

214pp.

**Publisher:**

Ashgate

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Patrick Williams

This is a comparatively short monograph on a very large subject, but it is a book of prime importance: a brilliant and incisive study of one of the most celebrated, indeed infamous, political philosophers of the Spanish Golden Age. In Spain, Juan de Mariana (1536-1624) was recognised as the exponent of a radically new theocratic structure for the Spanish monarchy, while abroad he became known, not altogether fairly, as a leading proponent of the doctrine of tyrannicide.

Dr Braun concentrates his attention on Mariana's tract, *De rege et regis institutione*, which he circulated privately in the 1590s as a 'mirror for princes' for the men who were charged with educating Prince Philip, the heir to the thrones of Philip II. By the middle of the 1590s, the leading ministers and courtiers of Philip II were becoming profoundly anxious about the influence being exerted over the prince by Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, fifth Marquis of Denia. It was at the behest of García de Loaysa, the leading churchman among Philip II's inner circle, that Mariana wrote *De rege* so as to provide a theoretical framework arguing against the adoption of a favourite or valido by the young king. Philip II died in September 1598 and Philip III duly took Denia as his valido. Within months, the new king had dismissed most of the leading servants of his father (including García de Loaysa), and effectively abandoned many of the prerogatives of kingship to Denia. In 1599 in despair at and in defiance of the turn of events (and his own failure to influence them), Mariana published a Latin version of his tract. It quickly became evident that in the earlier unpublished piece he had launched a devastating attack upon the historical reputation of Philip II, and had allowed himself to muse openly about the competence of the new king. Furthermore, he had aired his own anxieties that Philip III's inadequacies would lead to the loss of Spain to a new dynasty.

Dr Braun's study of Mariana and of *De rege* is highly compressed in its analysis and uncompromising in its

scholastic rigour. Political theorists will be more at home with his methodology (and language) than political historians; but his book will be required reading for everyone interested in political theory and courtly politics in Spain, for it adds substantially to our understanding of the intellectual background, to the ebb and flow of courtly politics. This is especially true because, by a remarkable historical quirk, Mariana was re-adopted as a political seer by courtly insiders at the beginning of the reign of Philip IV in 1621. Understanding *De rege*, therefore, provides a sharp focus for the tortured politics at the outset of the reigns of both Philip III and Philip IV. Juan de Mariana was a man who was equally dangerous to friends and foes alike, and Dr Braun is a sensitive and accomplished guide to an extraordinary and complex writer.

Philip II was the leading European statesman of his time. Deeply versed in the arts of kingly propaganda, Philip assiduously cultivated his reputation as a 'prudent' king who deliberated long and hard before taking decisions. Indeed, he consciously rejoiced in the sobriquet of 'the Prudent King'. His death was recognised across Europe by many as signifying the passing of a political giant, while in Spain, it stimulated a flood of literature that was sometimes quasi-idolatrous in its eulogies of his achievements. More important still than the encomiums to the late king, were the writings that offered counsel and advice to his young successor. An important service that Dr Braun performs is to insist that this flood of political discourse at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries constituted the true beginnings of what became known as 'arbitrismo', the proffering of advice to the king as to how he could remedy the politico-psychological crisis in Spain. Previously historians have tended to locate the origins of this powerful movement in the years after Lerma's departure from court in 1618.

Dr Braun redirects attention to the crucial years around the death of 'the Prudent King' and the beginning of the 'valimiento', or 'favourite-ship', and provides a very important gloss on the debates among historians about the 'decline' of Spain. Here, he is in the most exalted company; for example, Miguel de Cervantes, the greatest of Spanish writers, coined the term 'arbitrios' to describe the devices proposed to the king so that he could remedy affairs. Cervantes understood well enough that the vocabulary of political discourse changed dramatically at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. In *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615), Cervantes satirised the inadequacies and failures of kings and governors, but not even he went as far as Mariana in savaging the reputation of Philip II and Philip III. Moreover, none of the writers, the 'arbitristas' who proposed arbitrios to Philip III, were as remotely critical of the power and conduct of the late king (or as dismissive of the stature of the new king) as Mariana.

Mariana was the illegitimate son of a priest and it is interesting, although ultimately fruitless, to speculate whether his nerveless audacity had its roots in his standing as an outsider in society. He had entered the fledgling Society of Jesus in 1554 under the patronage of Francisco de Borja (who, curiously, was maternal grandfather of the marquis of Denia). Following the completion of his first degree at Alcalá, he became one of the last Spanish scholars of the mid-Habsburg period to study abroad, spending 13 years in Italy and France. After his graduation from the Roman College of the Society of Jesus (1561-5), he became rector of the University of Loreto and professor of theology at Messina University (1567-9). In the years 1569-74, he taught in the faculty of theology at the Sorbonne and played an important role in its revitalisation (a most unusual achievement for a servant of Philip II). If Mariana had ever held any optimism about the future, his years in Italy and France destroyed it; by the time that he returned home in 1574, he was convinced that Catholicism was under such a serious threat across the face of Europe that it might not survive, even in Spain itself.

It was not altogether surprising that, initially, he found a natural home in inquisitorial politics, serving as a censor in the production of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of 1583. He also established his reputation as a writer, producing in 1592 the *Historia General de España*, which marked him out as a leading figure in the distinguished school of Castilian historians and won him a reputation as the Spanish Thucydides. It may have been his fame as a historian that enabled him to cultivate powerful patrons; he earned the trust of, among others, Cardinal Gaspar de Quiroga, inquisitor-general and archbishop of Toledo, and García de Loaysa, archbishop-elect of Toledo and tutor to Prince Philip. It was almost certainly García de Loaysa who encouraged Mariana to produce *De rege*.

Mariana applied the broadest of brushes to this task. As a preparatory step, he questioned the very nature of monarchy. He broke with many of his distinguished Spanish forbears by arguing that there had been a Golden Age immediately after the Fall during which rulers had displayed exemplary virtue. Unfortunately, the Golden Age had been progressively destroyed as powerful men intimidated their neighbours and created putative monarchies. As Philip II lay dying in the 1590s (a crucial juncture in the development of the Spanish monarchy), astoundingly, Mariana argued that monarchy was nothing more than a necessary evil, which had to be tolerated as the least destructive form of government. Moreover, he accepted only with the greatest reluctance the transference of power through the principle of primogeniture, once again, because it was the lesser evil. There is no record of how García de Loaysa and his colleagues responded to the offering that the fractious Jesuit placed before them.

Philip II had ruled Spain for 42 years - leading the fight against heresy abroad, and defending the principles of the Spanish monarchy at home - and it was a truism of Spanish courtly politics in the later 1590s that he had been a great, perhaps the greatest Spanish king. However, even Philip II's eulogists found it difficult to deny that his reputation had been damaged by the series of failures of his last decade: his decision to send 'the Spanish Armada' against England in 1588 (and two subsequent fleets, each of which failed abysmally, in 1596 and 1597); his commitment to intervention in the French civil wars at a time when he was fighting a major war in the Low Countries; and his imposition of new levels of taxation in Castile to fight off the threat of invasion after the failure of 1588 (the millones of 8,000,000 ducats agreed with the cortes of Castile for the years 1590-6). The failures of the years 1588-98 were reinforced when in 1596-1602, Castile was visited by the worst natural disaster in its history: a ferocious strain of bubonic plague, which carried off 600,000 people (one-twelfth of the population of the kingdom). The great plague was truly an apocalyptic event and it, more than the death of Philip II, marked the point at which Castilian resources began to decline and the ebullient self-confidence that had characterised its civilisation in the 16th century began to buckle. It was at this extraordinary conjuncture that Mariana elected to publish *De rege*.

Mariana did not even pretend that Philip II had ever been a great king; rather, he methodically savaged the twin poles upon which his reputation rested: 'the Prudent King' and 'the Catholic King'. Instead, Mariana described him as a worthy successor to Nimrod, Alexander and Pope Julius II. He scathingly identified errors of judgement which had profound and important long-term consequences; for example, he blamed Philip for provoking the revolt in the Low Countries by executing the counts of Egmont and Hornes in 1568, arguing that a more conciliatory policy would have prevented the revolt. Mariana took even greater exception to Philip II's caesaro-papism, denigrating the manner in which he had controlled appointments to the episcopacy and had taxed the Church. But Philip II was not alone in his errors and Mariana believed that all Spanish monarchs for over a century had abused their power over the Church. This had been as true of Ferdinand and Isabella as it had been of the Habsburgs, and Philip II was only the most recent, albeit the worst, of the rulers of Castile and of Spain in this regard. Monarchy might have been a necessary evil, but Mariana left his readers in little doubt of its potential for wrong-doing, especially in its manipulation of the Church and its resources. Within the context of Spanish monarchical politics, this was iconoclasm on the very grandest of scales.

While dismissive of Philip II, Mariana barely troubled to hide his contempt for Philip III. He noted that, 'often enough sons are unlike their parents in intellect, nature and morals' (p. 33) but, despairingly, insisted that even if a son was noticeably less able than his father, his rule would still be supported out of respect for the dynasty. The most that could be said of the dynastic principle was, in his view, that it produced less-bad rulers than elective monarchy. He found it impossible to disguise his fears that Philip III would fail so signally in his duties of kingship, and that through his inability to procreate he would hazard the endurance of the dynasty itself. Mariana could not even find solace in Philip III's religiosity, urging the young man not to lose his way in his own piety and spirituality.

What, therefore, could Philip III and his advisers do to redeem the situation (or to lessen the harm already done)? In Mariana's view, Philip III could only govern well if he handed over control of his government to senior churchmen. Preparatory to doing this, the king would have to absorb 'the counsel of history', for while

tutors and councillors often dared not speak their mind honestly and honourably, history unflinchingly did so. Philip had to recognise at the outset of his reign that 'the prince should always wish to rule over willing subjects' and that the republica was 'held together by reward and punishment, fear and hope' (pp. 66-7). Mariana insisted that Philip's tutors should impress upon him that a prince had to moderate his actions precisely because he feared the people over whom he ruled. In particular, Philip III had to ensure that he did not over-tax his subjects lest they rise against him in their resentment and fury. Mariana dared even to draw attention to the slaying of two Catholic monarchs, Mary Queen of Scots (1587) and Henry III of France (1588), as having been justified because both monarchs had sought to preserve their kingdoms by political stratagems rather than by the laws of God. Dr Braun argues that Mariana was attempting to intimidate princes in general (and Philip III in particular), to moderate their behaviour out of fear that their lives might be at risk. Certainly, *De rege* was replete with warnings that Philip III should not change the fundamental laws and traditions of Castile, especially those which governed religion, taxation and succession. Mariana's strictures rebounded upon him and upon the reputation of the Spanish monarchy when, in 1610, Henry IV of France was murdered by a Catholic fanatic. Philip III had to disclaim responsibility, but the accusation that Mariana had urged (and justified) regicide stuck to him, to Spain and to the Society of Jesus.

Above all (it was his central argument), Mariana insisted that prudence obliged a prince to rule personally and not through a favourite. The heir should understand that he was obliged to take advice widely from within his court and government, emphasising that it was 'the mark of a great prince ... to have great courtiers' (p. 118). Giving sole authority to an individual would deprive the many good servants of the crown of all hope of reward and might even, as a consequence, lead to the threat of civil war. These were precisely the truisms that Philip II and his inner circle of advisers were urging upon Prince Philip, so that he should retain those advisers and not allow Denia to assume power as *valido*. Mariana insisted that the possible rise of the *valido* had to be pre-empted by appointing as royal tutor a man 'conspicuous for his prudence' and 'outstanding in this reputation for erudition and virtue' (pp. 118-19). He did not feel it necessary to identify García de Loaysa as the appropriate choice. This was, of course, special pleading on the grand scale.

It was all the more imperative that the king should take advice from clergymen because Mariana could not see any salvation for Spain coming from any of the other secular arms of the body politic. He believed that neither the Castilian nobility nor the cortes of Castile were capable of restricting the overweening power of the Monarchy. The people of Castile were, in his view, incapable of defending themselves against a tyranny in which public affairs were run by 'the capricious will of the king and the desires of the few' (p. 56).

With an inept king, an overpowering *valido*, a corrupted aristocracy and a feeble cortes, the Church alone could be trusted to guide Spain through the hazards of the time. Mariana encouraged Philip III to grant extraordinary privileges and authority to his bishops so that they could take hold of secular and courtly government, and even key areas of military power. He urged that they should be readmitted to the membership of the cortes of Castile (which had lapsed in 1538). Furthermore, Philip III should recruit the members of his governing councils and juntas exclusively from the episcopacy. These proposals could not be squared readily with the principles adumbrated at the Council of Trent, and in this sense Mariana cannot be fully regarded as a Counter-Reformation writer. In any event, Mariana's study of history should have disabused him of his belief that the ecclesiastical barons of Ferdinand and Isabella's reign could be taken as models for the new age in which churchmen were to guide the affairs of the monarchy: Jiménez de Cisneros and Pedro González de Mendoza and their like were hardly appropriate role-models for the post-Tridentine Catholic Church.

Inevitably, Mariana's suggestions were swept aside and by the time that *De rege* was published, Philip III had effectively handed over management of the affairs of the monarchy to Denia. In November 1599, he raised him to the dukedom of Lerma and by the end of the year, Lerma was wielding authority on a scale for which there was no real precedent. It was appropriate, therefore, that García de Loaysa was not confirmed as archbishop of Toledo (he was replaced by Lerma's great-uncle, Bernardo de Rojas y Sandoval), and that other senior ministers of Philip II were dismissed from office as Lerma consolidated his authority. For the best part of 20 years Lerma exercised almost untrammelled power, elevating his family and kinsmen to pre-eminence in court, Church and government, and earning a prodigious fortune from his exploitation of the

royal grace. Lerma remained in office until 1618, when he retired to enjoy his cardinalate for the last years of his life. Mariana's worst fears had proved to be understated.

*De rege* might have remained as little more than a tract of antiquarian interest were it not for Philip III's sudden death in 1621, when the new ministers of Philip IV adopted it as an emblematic text precisely because it had been so strongly opposed to the development of the *valido*. Once again the tract became central to the development of courtly politics, for Gaspar de Guzmán, count of Olivares, wished to position himself as the chief minister of the new king rather than as his *valido*. This was, of course, an optical illusion, for Olivares was every bit as much a *valido* as Lerma had been, copying many of the stratagems that Lerma had used and emulating him in exercising the key office of *caballerizo mayor*.

The reappearance of *De rege* at the heart of courtly politics after nearly 20 years was itself rather quixotic. When Olivares and his supporters harkened back to a 16th-century Golden Age they could not acknowledge that the reign of Philip III had seen many positive achievements that had not been foreseeable in 1599. In particular, his reign had witnessed a revitalisation of government due to Lerma's wish to associate with professional administrators so that he himself should not bear sole responsibility for governmental policies. It also saw the reinvigoration of the cortes of Castile because the crown needed to tax its Castilian subjects more heavily. The *millones* were renewed in 1600, when the kingdom agreed to provide 18,000,000 ducats in six years, and again in 1608 (this time for 17,500,000 ducats over seven years). The taxpayers of Castile were now taxed substantially beyond their means, but still the burden grew. In 1611, the crown decided to divide the amount produced by the *millones* among the cities and towns of Castile (the *repartimiento*). This proved to be a historic watershed for a storm of criticism broke on Philip and his ministers that lasted into the next reign.

The reign of Philip III also saw a radical development of the capital city. Admittedly, this came about almost by chance; in 1601, Lerma persuaded Philip to move the court to Valladolid (the city in which he had been brought up) so that he could build up his own estates and buildings. The experiment failed, and in 1606 the court returned to Madrid. The restored capital then became not merely a courtly, cultural and social centre, but also a place of prime religious importance (more churches and religious houses were founded in Madrid in the years 1606-21 than at any time until the 18th century). There is no record that Mariana approved of the new importance of the clergy in the revitalised capital city.

Olivares could not accept Mariana's primary solution to the dangers facing the monarchy, for he could never allow the young king to rule through senior churchmen in secular and religious matters. However, he was able to identify closely with a tract, *Del cambio de la moneda* (published by Mariana in 1606), which argued that Philip II, by debasing the coinage in 1599, had reneged upon his solemn duties to his subjects. Mariana was imprisoned from 1609-11 and, therefore, became publicly identified as a courageous opponent of a corrupt regime. It was this publicity which most certainly commended him to the *olivaristas*.

There was, however, one important area in which Mariana was in agreement with Lerma, Olivares and many other senior aristocrats: the robust condemnation of the operation of the statutes of *limpieza de sangre*. For nearly half a century, these statutes had been used to exclude from public office men whose purity of blood was contaminated by Jewish or Moorish influence. Many members of the Society of Jesus had reason to fear the operation of the statutes, for in 1593 the General Congregation had excluded the descendants of men of doubtful blood from entering the Society. Mariana was deeply angered by the implementation of the statutes, arguing that their use was corroding Spanish national life. In this at least he proved to be on the winning side within his own Order, and in February 1608 the Society revoked the implementation of the statutes.

Juan de Mariana was, therefore, a political theorist of exceptional originality and power, as well as a major historian. Dr Braun is to be congratulated on placing this most difficult of writers into his proper context and in introducing him to a wider audience. There are a couple of misprints, but these will doubtlessly be corrected when this excellent study goes into a second edition, as it richly deserves to do. It is no part of the business of a reviewer to suggest how an author could follow up such a book, but an edited English edition of *De rege* would, it is now evident, fill an enormous gap.

The author would like to thank Patrick Williams for this review and is pleased to accept it without further comment.

**Other reviews:**

muse

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cat/summary/v095/95.2.wright.html> [2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/647>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3621>

[2] <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cat/summary/v095/95.2.wright.html>