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The Birth of Modern Politics in Spain: Democracy, Association and Revolution, 1854-1875

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Guy Thomson has distinguished himself through his extensive publications on regional history and liberalism and nation-building in 19th-century Spain and Mexico. 19th-century Spain has recently been subject to growing interest from British academics, and Thomson?s latest contribution does not disappoint. *The Birth of Modern Politics in Spain: Democracy, Association and Revolution, 1854?1875* is an innovative and much-needed contribution to our understanding of the field. Thomson focuses on eastern Andalucía, in particular the cities of Loja, Alhama and Antequera and their rural *comarcas*, and on the political lives of Loja?s famous sons, the strongman of the *moderados*, or conservative liberals, General Narváez, and the blacksmith Rafael Pérez del Alamo, chief of the city?s Democrats and leader of the ?Revolution of Loja? of July 1861. Like much Spanish historical writing, Thomson?s approach is regional. But unlike several Spanish writers of regional history, who are prone to parochial or ideological approaches (or both), Thomson retains one of the defining strengths of Anglo-Saxon historians of Spain, namely the ability to see the bigger picture. And his feat is all the more remarkable as he does not go for such low-hanging fruit as Barcelona, Madrid, or even the provincial capitals of Andalucía as such. Rather he explores the politicisation of supposedly ?peripheral? small towns and villages in Andalucía, uncovering the militancies of middling Democrat conspirators and activists and the social and geographical networks in which they operated. In so doing, Thomson certainly honours regional history. But more importantly, Thomson achieves the

remarkable feat of seriously challenging orthodox notions of Spanish political modernity.

19th-century Spain has traditionally been seen as backward and ?peripheral? in relation to ?core? European states, and backward even in relation to its own geographical periphery. Whereas most other nineteenth-century European states underwent recognisably modern patterns of nation-building, Spain seemed set on an intractable *Sonderweg*. For a long time, modern political ideas either failed to take root in its dry soils, or were crowded out by an organic Catholic traditionalism, the purest expression of which was Carlism, Europe?s most resilient legitimism. Thus even though Spanish liberals took control of the state during 1810?4, 1820?3, and definitively in 1840 following a bloody seven-year civil war against Carlists, only in Madrid, a few provincial capitals, and Spain?s peripheral commercial and industrial cities could they forge their modern, very patrician, politics. Spanish industrialisation was seen as patchy, and mainly confined to its ?progressive? Catalan fringe. There was no Spanish 1848. Whereas other European states gained overseas empires, Spain lost hers. Whereas they advanced majority state nationalisms, Spain advanced minority peripheral nationalisms in Catalonia and the Basque country. Even radical politics were different. In most countries, this meant Marxist socialism; Spain, by contrast, developed Western Europe?s strongest anarchist movement. And as if all this were not enough, there remained the dominant status of the Spanish Army. First (and irretrievably) politicised during the 1808? 14 war against Napoleon, the army made Spain the classic country of the *pronunciamiento*, making and breaking revolutions in a weak civil society.

This ?failure? discourse has led to Spain receiving marginal treatment in countless survey histories of Europe. Explaining this ?failure?, Hispanists have stressed the myopia of Spain?s liberal oligarchs (1), the unreconstructed and apolitical kinship of elites (2), a failed ?bourgeois revolution? (3), and a failed agricultural revolution.(4) By contrast, in his *Birth of Modern Politics* Thomson advances the revisionist view of what we may term the ?normalisation? school. This is a challenging and interesting premise for two reasons. Firstly, most historiography concerning 19th-century Spanish radicalism (5) is really a discourse about contemporary Spanish democracy and therefore of limited help to those of us who wish to read history forwards. Secondly, in tracing political radicalism at small-town and village level, Thomson challenges the stereotype which sees rural Spain as the negation of the modern city, as a timeless and ?sleeping? habitus which could be pitch-forked into action only whenever villagers found themselves on the receiving end of bandits, elections, conscription, the liberal property revolution, or millenarian proselytisers. In short, even though modern politics may have happened *to* rural Spain, it certainly did not come *from* it. Thomson thus has quite a mountain to climb. And, remarkably, he manages to do it.

Base camp for Thomson is the ?normalisation? historiography which since the 1990s has seen Liberal Spain as marching much more in step with other European nation-states in terms of political and economic modernity.(6) Following this logic, Thomson goes to great pains to internationalise the Isabeline Democrats: ?Democrat support was boosted by an exhilarating international climate provided by the Risorgimento and what seems a pan-European, even global struggle of oppressed peoples, evidenced by the Indian Mutiny, the growth of Irish nationalism, the Polish revolt, Mexico?s resistance to the French Intervention, the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery? (p. 296). This international context is shown to be more than mere commentary. Spanish Democrats found the path to ?respectable? politics resolutely blocked by the centralised state, strengthened as this was by railways and telegraphs, a politicised judiciary, restrictive electoral franchise, the Concordat of 1851, and by the guns of the Civil Guard, and, if needs must, the army, all of which were at the service of the dynastic parties, the conservative liberals (*moderados*) and, occasionally, the progressive liberals (*progresistas*), both patrician interest groups whose attitudes towards democracy ranged from paranoia to condescension. Thus barred from open politics, Democrats used newspapers in order to engage ever more people in an expanding public sphere. And these newspapers offered blanket coverage of nationalist and democratic struggles overseas, especially those of the Hero of Marsala, Giuseppe Garibaldi, all of which, Thomson holds, made Spanish democrats identify themselves with wider international politics. Democrats also subverted the Isabeline establishment thanks to another Italian import, the secret *carbonari* model of insurrection which inspired the radical wing of the Democrat Party (founded in 1849) in the wake of the failed 1854?6 *Bienio Progresista*.

Secret societies and the press thus form the substance of Thomson?s analysis, which he sustains by close

interrogation of radical newspapers, police reports of the Loja Revolution, municipal archives, and the personal archive of General Narváez. Thomson also mobilises that most precious source in nineteenth-century Spain, the political memoir, one from each side of the political divide (Pérez del Alamo and the *moderado* civil governor, Antonio Guerola). This ample array of primary research allows Thomson to construct a coherent and satisfyingly biographical chronology, divided into 13 chapters and four parts. Part one explores the roots of political factionalism and clandestinity during the Moderate Decade (1844?54), up to the Revolution of Loja. Part two explores the July 1861 radical occupation of Loja and its subsequent repression by the military tribunals. Part three explores both the endurance of conspiratorial radicalism and the attempts by *moderados* to revive lapsed Catholicism as a means of leading villagers away from Democrat subversives, several of whom were all the more objectionable for being Protestant evangelisers who counted on Gibraltar as a base and bolthole. And part four concerns how the fall of the Bourbon monarchy in the *Gloriosa* of 1868 liberated Democrats from clandestinity and allowed them to merge with Left *progresistas* to form a united Republican Party.

The second and third parts are the most important, and not just for what they teach us about small-town radicalism. Rather, Thomson also unearths small-town *moderado* paternalism, including relief administered through the diminished Catholic Church, and the system of shelter (alojamiento) provided by landlords to their day-labourers during seasonal times of dearth. In so doing, he shows the reader a likeable side to General Narváez ? something which may surprise Hispanists more than other readers ? even though he steers clear of the sort of unconvincing and hagiographical treatment (e.g. Révész, 1953) which has been accorded to this chieftain of the centralised state. Of course, it might be countered that in caring for his less fortunate *lojeños* the General?s paternalism had nothing to do with the Neo-Catholic movement and everything to do with his need to maintain a populist platform, especially during his lengthy Parisian exile under O?Donnell?s 1858?63 Liberal Union. In any case, in showing a rare polychromatic side to Narváez, Thomson?s study inevitably invites a proper biography of the *espadón de Loja*. And in tracing the political trajectories of both Narváez and his literal neighbour, the blacksmith and Democrat, Pérez del Alamo, Thomson achieves two important objectives. Firstly, he shows how the centrist Liberal Union?s desire to deny Narváez a political platform in Loja led to Madrid effectively turning a blind eye to Democrat machinations in this lynchpin of the sierras. Secondly, Thomson breathes life into Spain?s increasingly articulate left-right political divide, a divide which needs to be understood no longer in the timeworn paradigm of Spanish exceptionalism, but as part of a recognisably modern evolution.

In conclusion, Guy Thomson?s *Birth of Modern Politics in Spain* is innovative, stimulating and thought-provoking. In the 1960s, the Francoist tourism ministry, keen to combine economic growth with self-legitimisation, coined the phrase ?Spain is different?. This slogan has loomed large ever since. So many historians have erected all manner of ideological barricades either defending or attacking Spanish exceptionalism. Thomson, however, politely circumvents these ideological barricades and observes that Spain wasn?t so different after all.

Notes

1. Raymond Carr, *Spain, 1808?1939* (Oxford, 1966); Charles Esdaile, *Spain in the Liberal Age: From Constitution to Civil War (A History of Spain)* (Oxford, 1999).Back to (1)
2. Jesús Cruz, *Gentlemen, Bourgeois, and Revolutionaries: Political Change and Cultural Persistence among the Spanish Dominant Groups, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1996); *Los notables de Madrid. Las bases socials de la revolución liberal española* (Madrid, 2000).Back to (2)
3. Miguel Artola-Gallego, *La burguesía revolucionaria* (Madrid, 1974); Jordi Nadal, *El fracaso de la revolución industrial en España, 1814?1913* (Madrid, 1977); Josep Fontana, *La crisis del antiguo régimen* (Barcelona, 1992).Back to (3)
4. Edward E. Malefakis, *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain: Origins of the Civil War* (London, 1970); Antonio Miguel Berbal, *La lucha por la tierra en la crisis del antiguo régimen* (Madrid, 1979).Back to (4)
5. Iris M. Zavala, *Masones, comuneros y carbonarios* (Madrid, 1971); Alberto Gil Novales, *Las sociedades patrióticas (1820?1823)*

(Madrid, 1975); Irene Castells, *La utopía insurreccional del liberalismo: Torrijos y las conspiraciones liberales de la década ominosa* (Barcelona, 1989); *Revolución y democracia: el jacobinismo europeo*, ed. Irene Castells, Lluís Roura i Aulinas (Madrid, 1995); Ronald Fraser, *La maldita guerra de España. Historia social de la Guerra de la Independencia, 1808?1814* (Barcelona, 2006).Back to (5)

6. David Ringrose, *Spain, Europe, and the ?Spanish Miracle?, 1700?1900* (Cambridge, 1996); Isabel Burdiel, *La política en el reinado de Isabel II* (Madrid, 1998); *Economía, sociedad, política y cultura en la España de Isabel II*, ed. Gonzalo Anes, Alvarez de Castrillón (Real Academia de la Historia, 2004); Manuel Santirso Rodríguez, *Progreso y libertad: España en la Europa liberal, 1830?1870* (Madrid, 2008); Andrés Révész, *Un dictador liberal: Narváez* (Madrid, 1953).Back to (6)

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

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