

Gonzalo Pasamar

Apologia and Criticism



Historians and the History of Spain,
1500–2000

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Introduction

In 2006, I had the good fortune to give a series of lectures on ‘Historians and Spanish Culture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, to be delivered at Rutgers University (New Jersey, United States) in the Department of Classic and Modern Languages and Literatures.¹ I also had the opportunity, when preparing my notes, to directly observe that the two main issues to be tackled went their separate ways, or at least did not converge as one would have wanted: the study of the history of Spanish historiography, and the topic of Spanish identity. And when, eventually, I dared to transform those lectures into a more cohesive book, I had to change my strategy. I was only able to understand how historiography has mirrored the idea of Spain by going back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the idea of Spanish identity and that of Spanish history began to take on the lineaments of their future shape.

On the first issue, the study of the history of historiography, it could be said – at the very least – that it shows great promise as a broad field of research. During the last twenty years, Spanish historiography has made great strides, becoming an up-to-date field with regard to international trends and current historical paradigms. At this moment, we can be sure that there is no ‘new history’, or new theoretical criterion, that is excluded from current Spanish historical research. Not surprisingly, interest in the knowledge of historians and their writings, and in historical institutions, as much from the present as from the past, has been the object of much attention in recent decades. This constitutes an unambiguous symptom of

1 The seminar formed part of a stay as Visiting Research Professor at Rutgers University (Newark), from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science’s Program of ‘Estancias en Centros Extranjeros de Profesores de Universidad e Investigadores Españoles’ (September–November 2006). The research project was entitled ‘The North-American Hispanism and the historical image of Spain’.

the growing maturity of Spanish historiography. What is more, noteworthy studies of the most outstanding historians and their works and institutions, in addition to the teaching of history and its origins in the nineteenth century, have been published, together with countless examinations of specific historical issues and a great variety of thoughtful reflections. There has even appeared a dictionary of contemporary Spanish historians (I shall quote it in due course) in the preparation of which I took part as co-author.² There was, nevertheless, a lack of synthesis offering a general overview, explaining the main ideas and themes of the development of Spanish historiography – from the earliest centuries to the most recent times – that would help the spread of ideas in this field.

With regard to the topic of Spanish identity, the current situation also has a rich bibliography. By 2005, there existed over 100 academic titles, covering the Spanish, Catalan, and Basque nationalisms of the nineteenth century, most of them published in the previous ten years.³ Such an array of work is not difficult to explain: this new field has burst onto Spanish historiography since the issue of Spanish identity – in contrast to Catalan, Basque, and Galician identities – not to mention the other Spanish communities, became the object of an unprecedented and dramatic political and intellectual debate in the 1990s. The import of this, for historical research, is summarized in the ambiguous expression ‘Spain, nation of nations?’ – the title, in the form of a question, of a recent study devoted to Spanish nationalisms.⁴ Such hesitation demonstrates that the topic has not achieved consensus among historians and other specialists, involving, as it does, the social and political uses of history and memory. Moreover,

- 2 Two different analyses of the current panorama of the field of Spanish history of historiography, in Gonzalo Pasamar, ‘Historia e historiografía española’, *Bulletin d’Histoire Contemporaine de l’Espagne*, 43 (October 2007), 5–20; and Miquel A. Marín Gelabert, ‘La historia de la historiografía en España: recepción y crisis de una disciplina, 1976–2007’, in *Por una historia global: el debate historiográfico en los últimos tiempos*, ed. by Teresa María Ortega López (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2007), pp. 391–437.
- 3 Estimations taken from Fernando Molina Aparicio, ‘Modernidad e identidad nacional: el nacionalismo español del siglo XIX y su historiografía’, *Historia Social*, 52 (2005), 167–71 (pp. 147–71).
- 4 ‘España, ¿nación de naciones?’, ed. by Anna María García Rovira, *Ayer*, 35 (1999).

that crucial development has taken place in a cultural milieu where Spanish citizens have learned to avoid the complexities arising during the Franco period and the Democratic Transition, when Spanish nationalism was often confused with the ideology of the Franco regime. This outcome has also paved the way for the influence of classic essays, such as those by Benedict Anderson and Eric J. Hobsbawm. During the 1980s, they had already suggested that nations were 'cultural artefacts of a particular kind' and that national traditions, formal and ritualistic processes, mainly born in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, referred to an 'invented' national past.⁵ What was a serious difficulty for Spanish historians then – because, to many, it seemed that conjuring up the 'Spanish nation' was reactionary – has turned out to be a positive element in recent times. However, the specialist in contemporary history does not take sustenance from 'public opinion' alone. For researchers into the history of historiography, the state of study of national identities proves insufficient in practice for the use of historians, and their historical writings, as a mirror of national ideologies, have not been sufficiently exploited. As we shall see, only a handful of authors – such as Juan-Sisinio Pérez Garzón, Benoît Pellistrandi, and Fernando Wulff – have selected historians and their historical writings as the main aim of their research into Spanish nationalism.

There is yet another difficulty in achieving my goal in writing this book. Nationalism is generally admitted to be a discursive construction, expressing either a community of citizens or a cultural community – in any case, a set of social practices – composed of politics, traditions, memory, historical writings, and intellectual ideas, emerging at the end of the eighteenth century from the era of revolutions. But it is also widely recognized that national identities pre-date modern nationalism, understood in this sense, going back to the rise of the absolute monarchies. The difficulty

5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 4; and Eric J. Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, *L'invent de la tradició* [1983] (Barcelona: Eumo, 1988), pp. 13–25. An examination of theories of nationalism, in Gerard Delanty, 'The Persistence of Nationalism: Modernity and Discourses of the Nation', in *Handbook of Historical Sociology*, ed. by Gerard Delanty and Engin F. Isin (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), pp. 287–300.

lies in the rigid academic division, in Spain, into ‘modern’ (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and ‘contemporary’ history (nineteenth and twentieth centuries), boundaries which do not coincide with those of other European traditions. This distribution of epochs, which was by no means new, has been informing the Spanish panorama since the 1960s, initially as a determinant way of focusing on the study of liberalism, the Restoration, and the Second Republic, whose treatment was for so long forgotten by historians, or influenced by Franco propaganda. But what was then a priceless novelty, a new field of teaching and research, notably concerning the delimitation of the last two centuries, risks becoming an obstacle to achieving a clear account of certain topics in the current circumstances of changing paradigms. I am aware that one of the properties of historical ideas developed in the twentieth century has been to identify new points of break and continuity in history, in other words, periodizations. But academic habits do not yield as easily as do theoretical ideas. I think I am correct when I say that the usual criterion of dividing up specialty areas into modern and contemporary history – at least in Spain – has become so rigid in current times (times of great historical uncertainty) that, in many cases, it has proven to be an obstacle rather than a means of dealing with topics that take us back to the sixteenth century. There is no lack of specialists in certain fields – for instance, in economic, and American, history – who have always known how to play down this division, but the subject of ‘national identity’ is a theme that presents this difficulty in all its complexity. It is true, nevertheless, that some authors, such as José Álvarez Junco, Fernando Wulff, and Ricardo García Cárcel, in tackling this issue, have already taken a first step in offering an overview of centuries, going back to early Modern times. But they have been, alas, in the minority. According to García Cárcel, the study of Spanish liberal nationalism, isolated from earlier representations of Spain, makes the historical idea of Spain appear as though it was a mere invention of the nineteenth century.⁶ The history of historiography is, thus, another field that needs to abandon rigid divisions and extend its analytic scope both backward and forward through time.

6 Ricardo García Cárcel, *Felipe V y los españoles. Una visión periférica del problema de España* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 2002), pp. 15–16.