

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

Spanish Historians and Brexit: On Special Paths and Historical Normality

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The triumph of Brexit in the UK 2016 referendum came as a big surprise to most Spanish intellectuals. Almost no one among them had imagined the possibility of having the United Kingdom outside the European Union. Great astonishment was found among writers, philosophers, politicians and opinion makers, who considered that the end of UK membership in the European Union might also mean the first step towards the breakdown of continental unity. In a country where the levels of pro-Europeanism stand out as among the highest within the EU, the fact that more than a half of British voters chose to leave the common club was widely misunderstood: in times of austerity and economic recession, it seemed, the rich wanted to quit the boat and leave the poor alone. Despite this, some Spanish commentators argued that the UK's abandonment also meant that Spain could increase its role and influence within EU politics and resurrected old-fashioned anti-English prejudices that still survive in the Spanish popular imagination – that of seeing British people as arrogant and selfish, reinforced by the negative image provided by hundreds of British tourists every summer in Mallorca or the Canary Islands. In this light, Brexit presented a great opportunity to Spain. Now was the time to show Europe how pro-European Spaniards could be, argued journalists and opinion makers, while at the same time forgetting about the long-standing Spanish inferiority complex in relation to the United Kingdom.

Among those to respond to the prospect of Brexit were early modern, modern and contemporary historians across Spain. It is their perspectives on British and Spanish history that shall form the focus of this contribution to the roundtable, because both shifted radically as a result of Brexit.

Traditionally, many Spanish historians had interpreted Britain's historical evolution since the early eighteenth century as a positive counter image to Spain's successive 'failures'. Britain's successes were regarded as the exact opposite of Spain's historical decadence since the late seventeenth century. According to this narrative, while Britain became the thriving sea power and acquired a dominant position in maritime commerce with the Americas and the East Indies, the Spanish empire witnessed an unstoppable decline. While the industrial revolution succeeded in Britain from the late eighteenth century onwards, Spanish industry failed to take off. And while in the course of the nineteenth century the UK successfully evolved into a late modern empire, Spain lost most of its overseas colonies and was unable to build a new imperial polity that could in any way compete with the British construction of a flexible system of dominance and control of multiple territories. Finally, Spanish historians had already observed that the UK's steady pace of political democratisation without revolution constituted a counterexample to the irregular path followed by Spanish political evolution, which peaked with the civil war of 1936–9. The UK political system was not only envied by Spanish conservative liberals and traditionalists, who were nostalgic of the 'good old times' of the Ancien Regime, but also by moderate republicans and socialist leaders, who admired the ability of the UK monarchy and its party system to evolve and integrate emerging political parties, such as the Labour Party. Even socialists and anarchists, who often criticised Spanish rule in Cuba, Puerto Rico or Morocco and

blamed the imperialist dreams of the Spanish monarchy, viewed the British empire as a model of liberal rule, based on tolerance and progress. Even those, such as Basque nationalists, who identified themselves with the Irish, the Boers' and the Indians' fight for home rule and independence during the first decades of the twentieth century, saw London rule as a positive contribution to the progress of backward and 'uncivilised' peoples.

This positive image of the UK as a paradigm of civic tolerance, democratic deliberation, progress and civilisation endured throughout the twentieth century and was shared by almost all political factions. This is true even if the British Empire was regarded by conservatives and traditionalists, and later by Spanish fascists and large sectors of the military, as the main power ultimately responsible for Spain's decline, as well as a nation based on commercial interests and the greed of merchants and sailors. Moreover, the UK had retained the island of Menorca (until 1802) and Gibraltar since the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). Although the irredentist claim over Gibraltar never constituted a powerful element of Spanish nationalist discourse, the aim to recover 'the rock' was sporadically taken up by diverse political factions. For Spanish fascists in the 1930s and 1940s this became nearly an obsession. Nonetheless, even the most representative fascist leader, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, was known for his refined anglophile character and his good English, while many of the generals who sided with Franco during the civil war of 1936–9 also admired the United Kingdom. Spanish liberal Republicans often looked to the UK as a model of civic virtues. This also included several exiled historians after 1939, such as Rafael Altamira and Salvador de Madariaga.

The UK provided an inverted mirror to Spain, and Spanish historians used British history as an influential yardstick particularly during and after Spain's transition to democracy after the death of General Franco in 1975. Many historians continued to be loyal to the early twentieth-century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's assertion: 'Spain is the problem, Europe is the solution'. Ortega primarily referred to Germany and France. Yet, for most of his pupils who found common European patterns in the Spanish past, and who sought to underline the normality of Spain's historical evolution, this also meant a comparison (often more implicitly than explicitly) with the United Kingdom. The UK was for most Spanish historians a quintessential product of European history, alongside French and German historical developments, and a useful role model for Spain's own future path.

The UK's historical evolution and British historians thus had acquired immense prestige among Spanish historians. But their understanding of British history was often rudimentary. It is fair to say that many Spanish historians looked at British history rather naively. Many were influenced by the school of British historians who wrote extensively on Spanish history, from Raymond Carr to John Elliot and Paul Preston, whose writings were characterised by an open-minded attitude, a 'liberal' stance which seemed to be far away from dominant Marxist historiography and late-Francoist narratives alike, and which were popular with large audiences because of their accessible narrative style. Some very influential historians in Spain, from Juan-Pablo Fusi to Enrique Moradiellos, studied in England and completed their PhDs at Oxford, Cambridge or the London School of Economics. However, Spanish historians rarely devoted themselves to the study of British history, nor its former colonies and dominions. Perhaps the only systematic exception to Spanish historians' lack of detailed interest in British history concerned Irish (and Northern Irish) history since the nineteenth century, as well as the development of Scottish nationalism. Without probing too much into the details, Spanish historians widely regarded the UK as the model industrial revolution that stood in stark contrast with the failed one in Spain (Jordi Nadal). This dominant interpretation was not revised until the early 1990s by other economic historians, who highlighted Spain's economic achievements within the South European context. Some authors emphasised the British influence on Spanish early liberalism during the first decades of the nineteenth century, as well as the British contribution to wine production in southern Spain and to the development of railways and mining industries. In these accounts, radical and revolutionary tenets were mostly supposed to have

arrived from France, Italy and the Mediterranean, while the United Kingdom was frequently regarded as the source of commerce and economic prosperity, alongside ‘moderate’, tolerant attitudes and tendencies, both on the left and on the right. British trade unions were presented as the counterbalance to revolutionary French syndicalism, while British authoritarian and anti-liberal thinking, which was seen to have influenced some Spanish radical reactionaries (such as Ramiro de Maeztu) were implicitly regarded as the non-fascist alternative by Spanish anti-Republican right-wing leaders during the 1930s.

The prospect of Brexit changed everything. It meant that the image of the UK as a positive counter-example to the ‘peculiarities’ – that is the absence of a supposed ‘normal’ path – of Spanish history was definitively broken. While Spanish public opinion and mainstream intellectuals continued to advocate for strengthening the European Union and reinforcing Spain’s role in Brussels, the UK’s unexpected move towards leaving Europe was regarded as a sign of a troublesome future. This broken comparison between Spain and the United Kingdom was all the more significant because both countries had twentieth-century experience of the development of sub-state nationalist movements within the territory of the former imperial core. In fact, one of the few Western European states, alongside Belgium, where the national question seemed to decisively impregnate post-Cold War politics was the United Kingdom. The Good Friday agreement in 1998 between Irish Catholic nationalists and Ulster unionists, with the mediation of London and Dublin, was a main factor in Spaniards’ wishful understanding of British politics as a model of tolerance and negotiation, and of consociational politics, which could be imitated by Basque nationalists and the Spanish government in the future. The later agreement between the London and Scottish governments to hold an independence referendum was presented in a similar way. The 2014 referendum for Scottish independence was also regarded by some Spanish historians as a possible path to be imitated by Spanish political elites, both in Madrid and Barcelona. The ‘British solution’ to national demands has featured as a positive counterexample to excessively polarised inner Spanish politics: the triumph of political dialogue and democratic deliberation. But now, with Brexit, this positive model was severely questioned and the consociational solution of nationality disputes seemed under threat.

The different stances on the national question by Spanish historians from different ideological and territorial angles – from conservative and liberal to left-leaning historians, and from Madrid-based ‘centralist’ historians to Barcelona-based ‘catalanist’ scholars – reflected the fact that the UK was no longer regarded as *the* supreme model of tolerance and governance, and British solutions were now suddenly seen as quite unsuitable for Spanish politics. While Catalan, Basque or Galician historians often compared their sub-state nations’ developments to that of the Irish, the Welsh or the Scots, many Spanish – i.e. pro-Spanish – historians, political scientists and sociologists tended to emphasise the stark differences and the existing asymmetries between the paths followed by Northern Ireland and Scotland within the Union, which was now regarded as a peculiar, post-imperial and multinational polity, and those followed by Catalonia, the Basque Country or Galicia within a ‘continental’ nation state. Therefore, they saw few lessons from the United Kingdom that could be learnt in Spain.

This political debate, which significantly influenced discussions in the domain of public history and historical culture, was also reinforced by a purely academic one. Historians preferred now to emphasise Spain’s similarities to many South and Central European countries, rather than the country’s purported backwardness in relation to the United Kingdom (as well as to France and Germany). This trend built on the greater insistence by younger Spanish historians in the late 1990s and early 2000s on the ‘normality’ of Spain’s historical development, and their increasing reluctance to see the United Kingdom, France or the United States as purported models of positive, ‘normal’ historical evolution in terms of economic and political modernisation. As was the case with other European historiographies, the extreme pessimistic interpretation of Spanish history that had prevailed throughout the 1980s was now being replaced with a more optimistic, or at least a more nuanced, one, which opted for underlining Spain’s

commonalities with a diversity of countries and European regions, instead of being obsessed with paradigmatic models of modernity.

The result of the Brexit vote meant that the positive image of British history as a yardstick for Spain, was further broken and now completely discarded. If the UK was not part of 'Europe' anymore, it made little sense to search for historical normality by looking at the UK. Similarly, the endurance of internal territorial questions within the UK after the Brexit referendum, and the fact that Scotland and Northern Ireland opted in their majority for remaining within the European Union, also posed a delicate question: Brexit could be accompanied by the internal 'break-up of Britain', as predicted in the 1970s by the Scottish sociologist Tom Nairn. This has strengthened most Spanish historians' confidence in 'Europe' (now meant as continental Europe) as the best solution for internal ethno-territorial tensions.

Are there any continental European models left for Spain to compare itself to? As mentioned above, Spanish historians reacted to the prospect of Brexit with an increased conviction about the need to redefine Spain's own path to modernity. According to this belief, Spain's early modern, modern and contemporary history should definitely detach itself from idealised perceptions of the past achievements of its European neighbours, the UK included, and should give up attempting to live up to outdated ideal types of political, social and economic development. The result of the Brexit referendum has also led most Spanish historians to rethink the purported *Sonderweg* of Iberian history and has contributed to highlight some vantage of points of contemporary Spanish politics, such as the absence until recently of politically relevant anti-immigration slogans in the public sphere, and the low public relevance of right-wing populist options based on anti-European discourse. On the contrary, Spanish Euroscepticism in recent times has been associated with new left-wing parties, as a reaction against the hard austerity measures imposed on the country by the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank since 2012. In this respect, Spain's difference to the United Kingdom now suddenly appears as a positive and welcome fact.