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Spain at the Crossroads: Imperial Nostalgia or Modern Colonialism?

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Unlike London, for example, where even the most oblivious and fun-seeking tourist is bound to encounter the traces of Britain's past overseas empire memorialized by commemorative monuments, buildings, tombs, and the Queen's jewels in the Tower of London, or as embodied by the diverse populations that have emigrated to the metropolis after decolonization, Madrid as the metropolitan capital of a once equally vast overseas empire has few "realms of memory" of what I will call "imperial consciousness." Perhaps we could count among them the names of a few metro stops (Callao, Tetuán, Pacífico and Colón) and plazas (again Callao, Cascorro at the top of the Rastro, and the Plaza del Descubrimiento), or neighborhoods (Tetuán, Pacífico), and dilapidated signs on old stores that announce to shoppers that they are entering a "tienda de ultramarinos." Amid the many statues that dot the city there exist only two commemorating empire: to Columbus and to Eloy Gonzalo, a working-class hero of the Battle of Cascorro in the 1895 war against Cuba. For previously

existing monuments memorializing empire no longer stand, having been demolished at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although the cultural practices of commemoration and memorialization are not the primary focus of my essay, I nevertheless begin by underscoring the dearth of commemorative sites to imperial memory in present-day Madrid's urban topography because this lack can be read as emblematic of Spain's ambivalence towards its imperial past. If, on the one hand, according to Antonio Feros "[b]etween 1970 and the 1990s hundred of articles and books appeared underlining the positive aspects of Spanish colonialism in the Americas, a 'deed,' Spaniards were told, the entire nation should be proud of and celebrate" (126). On the other hand, nineteenth-century Spain is hardly, if at all, remembered and, thus, represented as an imperial nation in spite of the fact that, for example, 1898, a date which is inextricably bound to the history of empire, continues to have a symbolic meaning in Spain's cultural imaginary.

The dialectically linked processes of remembering and forgetting have shaped our contemporary memory of empire in such a way that the Spanish "empire" has come to be almost exclusively identified with the conquest and colonization of the Americas and the Philippines. What has been forgotten or exists in the postimperial memory as barely discernable traces are the remnants of the American empire after Ayacucho (1824), Spain's meager foothold in Africa, and the politics of colonial expansion which seem to have obsessed the forward-looking and modernizing sectors of Spanish society particularly at mid-century. It is important, therefore, when reflecting upon Spain's imperial past, the remembrance of empire, and the politics of memory, to clearly differentiate between the early modern empire, which includes the conquest and colonization of the New World, and what I will call "modern empire" which paradoxically originates around the moment when Spain loses the majority of its overseas colonies. The abundance of historical memory about the early modern empire produced by the 19th- and 20th-century intelligentsia culminating in the Franco regime's complete embrace of Spain's early modern imperial identity stands in sharp contrast to the occlusion of the 19th-century modern empire from Spain's historical memory.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that contemporary historians of 19th-century Spain—with the exception of Josep Fradera—have marginalized, if not erased, Spain’s modern imperial history from their historical narratives because they have chosen to privilege other narratives: the stories of Spain’s complex liberal nation-building project; its uneven capitalist development; and/or its national identity formation. Recent important efforts to theorize the construction of Spanish nationalism from a historical perspective have focused on Spain’s identity as a nation-state rather than on its identity as an imperial nation (Álvarez Junco). In spite of the fact that in contemporary historiography Spain’s colonialism and colonialist ventures might be mentioned—mostly in passing and in footnotes—, they are generally attributed to and portrayed as almost incomprehensible imperial fantasies rather than as the result of a well established colonial logic for Spain’s identity neither imagined nor represented as imperial. Empire is, thus, articulated as an accidental rather than as a fundamental attribute of Spain’s identity formation.

While this is not the occasion to delve into the reasons for this historiographical elision, several factors have converged to produce what I believe to be a misrepresentation of 19th-century Spain. One is the will to forget the lost empire due to the circumstances of its loss: Spain’s military defeats by the Latin American anticolonial insurgents between 1810 and 1824 and at the end of the century at the hands of an emerging imperial power in 1898. Another reason is that, compared to the other European imperial powers of the period (England, France, and Holland) the greatly diminished Spanish empire is considered to be if not an embarrassment, then the undeniable proof of Spain’s so-called “decline,” for indeed she had become a minor actor on the stage of imperial international relations. And, also, there seems to be no pressing need in Spain to remember the nineteenth-century as an imperial epoch because currently this country is engaged in the important memory-work of recalling a more recent history which has indelibly shaped its present: the origins of its civil war, the war itself, the exile of Republican Spain, and the ferocious repression of the early Franco years. There exists the hope that through this process of

remembrance the psychic and social wounds that have affected several generations of Spaniards will at long last heal.

Nevertheless, if our work as culture critics is that of revealing the multiple realities, discourses and representations woven into or intersecting in the cultural production of a period or in what Raymond Williams has called the “structures of feeling” of a specific epochal discursive formation, which in this case would be what could be called “Spanish modernity,” it is necessary, I would propose, to re-present Spanish identity as that of an imperial nation-state. For as we shall see, nation and empire continued to be inextricably linked in the political and cultural imaginary after Ayacucho. If on the one hand my project is to reinscribe into the 19th-century historical narrative what in its day was evident, that is to say, that Spain was an imperial nation, we need to articulate Spanish colonialism and the notion of “empire” as the palimpsest of contemporary historiography. This is not an easy task because since the very origins of “modern Spain,” which emerged during the Cortes de Cádiz, Spain’s intelligentsia has demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards the reality, history, and meaning of empire, which curiously enough continues to be articulated in today’s historiography.¹

Given the necessary brevity of this article, what I would like to suggest is that in order to reveal the 19th-century imperial narrative that we put into play David Scott’s insightful notion of what he calls “former presents” which, as I hope to show, opens up the historical narrative to include events and discourses that have been marginalized by the dominant contemporary historiographical master narratives about Spain. I will propose that the 19th-century’s “former present” was undeniably imperial, an identity that has been occluded by Spain’s contemporary present which rarely imagines or articulates itself as a postimperial nation. It could be argued that because Spain became a postcolonial nation over a century ago—unlike England, France, and Holland, for example—that she is no longer affected by the issues of postcoloniality that have come back to

¹ The polemics that took place during the Cortes de Cádiz regarding two important and thorny issues in the creation of the liberal political project for the new Spanish nation which as we should remember, was still an imperial state: the political representation of the colonials in the Cortes and the definition of the overseas territories as either provinces or colonies.

haunt English, French or Dutch society. While this may be true today, it may not be the case in the near future when the social, economic, and educational realities of Latin American immigration are fully acknowledged by Spanish society or the state.

In spite of the fact that Spain's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary landscape is dotted with colonial artifacts (places, commodities from its overseas colonies, literary characters in narratives and plays that take place in the Americas or Africa), critics and scholars rarely perceive the underlying imperial texts or, put another way, the inscriptions of empire in the cultural production of a nation that continued to be, in spite of its clearly diminished stature and size, the metropolis of an empire. Thus, and merely to give a few brief examples, Galdós's *Novelas Contemporáneas* are mostly—and quite rightly—read as texts that register the representation of a new bourgeois culture struggling to become a hegemonic force in an embryonic industrial-capitalist society, and his *Episodios Nacionales* are interpreted as historical narratives written with the intention of forging what was considered to be the “modern” Spanish nation. Yet, *Tormento's* Agustín Caballero, a very rich, virile and cosmopolitan *indiano*, not only saves Amparo Sánchez Emperador from social and moral disgrace by whisking her away to Bourdeaux, but also and importantly brings his indiano fortune to Madrid, amassed by his labor as an immigrant in Mexico and the borderlands between the United States and Mexico. He uses it to “modernize” his home by installing, among other things, a bathroom with running water much to the amazement of the other characters in this novel. Reading the series of *Episodios Nacionales*, that significantly do not begin with the War of Independence, the acknowledged origin of modern Spain—but with the battle of Trafalgar (1805), the site of Spain's demise as a naval power at the hands of Admiral Horatio Nelson and his modern imperial British navy—Galdós's chronicles of the emblematic events that created the modern nation eventually lead to the fourth series. It includes *Aita Tettauén*, the narrative of Spain's war in Morocco (1859-60) and *La vuelta al mundo en la Numancia*, which tells the story of Spain's war against Chile and Peru—the so-called Guerra del Pacífico (1865-66)—arguably an attempt to re-conquer the lost continental

American empire. In the theater, the most popular of the 19th-century genres, the war against Morocco was performed as a patriotic event in plays such as *Los moros del Riff*, *¡Españoles, A Marruecos!*, *¡Santiago y a ellos!*, and *El pabellón español en África*, just to mention a few of the many pieces that were written and staged during the brief duration of the war.

The critical inability to recognize the imperial intertexts in the 19th-century's literary and cultural production, I would argue, stems from the representational disconnect that exists between the contemporary historical representation of nineteenth-century Spain as a nation-state without an empire and its former "present identity" as an empire, albeit diminished, but nevertheless an empire. For, as we shall see, the nineteenth-century intelligentsia articulated its present and conceptualized ways of bringing to fruition the liberal project of constructing the modern Spanish nation as one inextricably linked to empire. This essay, therefore, seeks to prove this linkage between nation, colonialism and empire by exploring a foundational text of the Restoration, Antonio Cánovas del Castillo's *Discurso sobre la nación* (1882), as a site of imperial consciousness and as a significant text in the imperial archive that reveals the centrality of empire in the political imaginary that forged the modern nation. But it is worth remembering that empire was not only an abstract political or economic concept or socio-political formation, rather it was the reality lived by Spaniards, including the thousands of soldiers drafted to fight in Spain's colonial wars. This is the "former present" which the contemporary historical gaze has yet to fully acknowledge.

By all accounts the Restoration (1874) has been considered a break in Spanish nineteenth-century history, a watershed event that inaugurates the political formation that was to bring, among other things, a sense of political stability to the peninsula after decades of "pronunciamientos" and regional civil wars. With regards to colonial history, the Restoration also brings to an end the era of the Unión Liberal's dominance in the political arena—under the leadership of Leopoldo O'Donnell—, an epoch when Spain's colonialist politics were played out in the form of military expeditions primarily in postcolonial America, but which were not restricted to its former colonies: the so-called "Guerra de Africa" (1859-60);

the joint Franco-Spanish invasion of Mexico (1861); the occupation and annexation of Santo Domingo (1861); and, the aforementioned war against Chile and Perú (1865-66). After the advent of the Restoration, Spain no longer attempted any further territorial expansion, turning instead to maintaining its overseas colonies and resulting in three wars waged against Cuban independence and one against the insurrection of the Katipunan in the Philippines. Josep Fradera has summarized Spain's imperial politics thus: "[n]o se resignaba [España] a desaparecer del selecto club de países que en el siglo XIX se repartieron el mundo en beneficio propio" (687).

Although in hindsight the intelligentsia and the political class would evaluate O'Donnell's and the Unión Liberal's colonialist ventures and adventures at mid-century with differing degrees of approval, nevertheless, it is important to underscore that even the liberal intelligentsia before and after the Restoration understood colonialism to be a modern and, thus, forward-looking project for the nation. It was necessary in order to maintain Spain's prestige as a nation within the Western world constituted by imperial nation-states at the peak of their territorial expansion.² According to José Álvarez Junco this was due to the fact that "la posesión de un imperio pasó a ser el criterio para valorar, no ya a un Estado, sino a la nación a la que representaba" (503).

I now turn to a brief exploration of Cánovas's *Discurso sobre la nación*, an essay which this historian, politician, and acknowledged architect of the Restoration presented at Madrid's Ateneo on November 6, 1882. Cánovas's extensive and rhetorically tortuous speech is a meditation on the concepts of nation, nationality, and fatherland (*patria*) which weaves together a historical overview of these ideas, a polemic against those who in his estimation erroneously claimed that *nation* is a modern notion, a critique of Renan's *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, and which concludes with a blueprint for Spain's future.

Cánovas begins his lecture polemically by claiming that the nation is a transhistorical concept not a modern one. As proof of this he argues that the contemporary meanings of nation are already present in Spanish early

² This need for national prestige can also be found among other European nations. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, 230.

modern dictionaries such as Alonso de Palencia's *Vocabulario universal*, Antonio de Nebrija's *Vocabulario*, the *Diccionario de Autoridades*, and in the Covarrubias. Nevertheless he admits that they provide incomplete "expressions" of the concept. Further evidence that "nation" is not a modern notion—or indeed phenomenon—, in other words, a product of the contemporary era, is that his own definition merely combines disparate elements from previous ones in one overarching definition in which a common territory, race, and language are considered to be its essential characteristics.

[L]as naciones habitan un territorio común, aunque bien puedan tener apartadas colonias, o carecer, como la hebraica, de propio suelo mucho ha:...las naciones, o tienen raza propia originaria, o la constituyen, a la larga...lo más natural en las naciones es tener comunidad de idioma...el idioma es la primera prueba que ofrecen de sí y de su individualidad las naciones, así como no hay nada que tanto importe a su conservación, a su desarrollo histórico, a su restauración, si temporalmente y por acaso pierden la independencia. (69-70)

However, he points out that what was perhaps missing from previous characterizations of nation was "el reconocimiento de que la nación es hecho u obra divina" (69), an idea which is not unique to Cánovas. For the Providential nature of nations and their manifest destiny are cornerstones of nationalist discourses, and in the age of empire, of colonialist ones. Writing about the British empire, English historian J.H. Plumb notes that:

The vast growth of the British Empire, the fabulous wealth that poured into England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the almost constant success in battle, underlined, if underlining were to be needed, that England had a special destiny created for it by Providence. And even if, amongst more sophisticated minds, Providence was quietly dropped, the sense of manifest destiny was not. (85)

Having set forth his definition of nation Cánovas's next step in his argument is to establish a typology of nations predicated upon the notion of "civilization" which functions as the marker of difference between them. As is to be expected, "civilized" nations are Christian nations. But, in a significant twist to a predictable formulation, he does not differentiate among specific religions—Catholics and Protestants, for example—but

rather depicts Christianity as a shared set of beliefs and values whose objectives are identical. He proposes that “Todas las naciones civilizadas bajo los principios del Evangelio, las cuales, ni más ni menos lenta y manifiestamente se dirijan hoy a un fin idéntico, a una especie de nueva cruzada, de más seguros resultados que las antiguas: a implantar donde quiera, no la cruz tal vez, pero sí la civilización” (123-24). This normative linkage between nation and civilization inexorably leads Cánovas to exhort the idea of the “civilizing mission,” which, as we know, is one of the pillars of colonialist discourse. In spite of the fact that throughout the essay Cánovas rejects the purported “modernness” of the nation, he is, nevertheless, willing to recognize and, moreover, admit that during the contemporary period a significant shift has taken place in the civilizing mission’s strategy. For the duty of the civilized world is no longer merely to evangelize and convert the indigenous peoples as it had been in the past, but rather to “obligarlos [a los infieles] ...a tomar parte en la empresa común de la humanidad so pena de desaparecer, como elemento inútil, de la escena del universo” (124). Thus, clearly, for Cánovas the Christian nation is fundamentally a colonizing entity that must use force in order to fulfill its Divine mission, which is “la toma de posesión de todo el planeta por el hombre civilizado” (128).

After presenting his altogether unoriginal theory of the nation and its civilizing mission, he turns his meditation to Spain. For Cánovas, the issue at hand is not whether Spain is or is not a colonizing imperial nation for having been in the business of “civilizing,” that is to say, colonizing overseas territories for centuries, it most evidently is. Rather, the question he poses is whether Spain having already lost “su gloria de otros siglos” (130), should become a part of “ese corto número de naciones superiores” (131).³ His answer is unequivocal: “[m]ándanos el deber nuestro,...que entremos en el número de las naciones expansivas, absorbentes, que sobre sí han tomado el empeño de llevar a término la ardua empresa de civilizar el mundo entero” (131). Curiously—or, perhaps, symptomatically—he posits *honor*, arguably a residual aristocratic attribute within bourgeois culture,

³ The need to be counted among the “civilized nations” is necessary because “es muy peligroso quedarse tan atrás, como nos vamos quedando en la sociedad ambiciosa y egoísta de las naciones” (140).

as the primary reason fueling Spain's duty to be an expansionist nation rather than a nation dedicated to, for example, global trade or even the civilizing mission more in tune with the modern search for markets which underpinned colonialism (Hobsbawm 66). Nonetheless, for Cánovas Spain's ontological and political future is intimately bound to colonialism and empire.

While the text is nostalgic of Spain's past greatness as an imperial nation and mourns the loss of much of its empire, he nevertheless assures his audience that: "el territorio puede decirse que está íntegro, con una excepción deplorable, de que en todo tiempo juzgaré mucho más digno el no hablar que hablar inutilmente" (142). Unable to repress his anger about losing the continental American colonies even 60 years after the fact, he frames this undeniably forward-looking text by proposing that "[m]odestas deben ya ser nuestras palabras como nuestras obras; limitadas nuestras aspiraciones cuanto lo están nuestras fuerzas" (130). As he presents his blueprint for Spain's future at the end of the lecture, his imperial nostalgia recedes, giving way to what can be seen as a pragmatic sense of realism. He concludes by enumerating the imperatives necessary for Spain's survival as an imperial nation:

Trabajemos, produzcamos, ahorremos, seamos ricos, seamos disciplinados y ordenados, vivamos armónica, fraternalmente, y comenzaremos, no tan solo a querer, sino a ser de verdad fuertes. Al par que la restauración de nuestras fuerzas morales, robustezcámonos con las que presta el estudio asiduo de las artes y las ciencias, que fecundizan la agricultura, que adelantan la industria, que enseñan a dirigir el comercio, que facilitan comunicaciones, que dan o preparan recompensas colmadas a todos los triunfos, lo mismo a los económicos que a los militares, y tanto a los que logra el mérito individual, como a los que el mérito colectivo de las naciones alcanza. (141)

In what can be read as a handbook for Spain's modernization and/or a Decalogue of the individual and national attributes required for Spain to enter into the era of modernity (the Restoration's project), which significantly includes the production of new knowledge, it is important for us not to forget that for Cánovas Spain's future as a modern nation depends not only on the need to modernize itself within the peninsular territory, but also to be an "expansive" and "absorbing" nation whose "arduous

enterprise” is to “civilize the entire world.” I hope to have shown that in order to re-think and re-articulate Spain’s former present, it is necessary to inextricably link Spain’s identity as a nation to colonialism, modernization, and modernity as they clearly were during the 19th century.

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