Democracy Beats the "Disaster" Complex: Spanish Interpretations of the Colonial Crisis

Twenty years before the Spanish-American War of 1898, moderate republican parliamentarian Rafael María de Labra lamented what he thought was one of Spain's "fatal mistakes"—the exceptionalist syndrome that led Spanish intellectuals to rhapsodize about "our brilliant history that is presented as unique." He then went on to stress the need to study and compare the experiences and contributions of foreign peoples, with a view to contextualizing and improving the comprehension of national history (1).

This exceptionalist bias continued to characterize Spanish historiography well past the mid-twentieth century, although today it does not seem so much a peculiar Spanish tendency as a trait shared by most Western historiography, a failing nurtured by narrow nationalism, ethnocentrism, and intellectual imperialism (2). The construction of national identity and the need to justify the imperial self have forced the interpretation of global human experience and interaction into ethnic and national straight-jackets from which escape is much desired and discussed (as a theoretical, intellectually-correct attitude), but as yet only dimly perceived as a reality. In a short but incisive discussion of American writings, Louis A. Pérez concludes that in the United States too "the rationale of empire remains embedded in the historiography" (3).

The Spanish sense of defeat and loss in 1898 may be aptly summed up by the popular phrase "More was lost in Cuba," still used to diminish by comparison the importance of any perceived blow. The symbolic value of the war of 1898—traditionally seen as "the Disaster"—cannot be overstressed. Spaniards have long seen the loss of Cuba as the emblematic event representing a profound domestic, colonial, and international crisis, although, as we shall see, recent revisionism is questioning and redefining the nature, the extent, and the repercussions of that crisis.

The general tone and content of the earliest Spanish historiography on the war was set even before the ink was dry on the treaty of Paris. Well before the "disaster" was consummated, speeches and press articles were already full of foreboding: finger-pointing as to the culpable parties; self-justification of political, military, and naval protagonists; anti-Yankeeism; patriotic breast-beating and demagogy, together with more insidious rhetoric designed to exploit the colonial crisis in order to destabilize and overthrow Práxedes Mateo Sagasta's liberal government—or even the monarchy itself—in the interests of other political options.

Between 1898 and the First World War, political protagonists and military participants published a large number of works, many of which have value today as primary sources (4). The overall effect of these works was to decry Spanish internal weaknesses in the social, political, economic, military, and cultural spheres. At the same time, the so-called "generation of 1898" produced a vast literature of an introspective, philosophical, and literary nature, concerned with the moral and cultural "regeneration" or revitalization of Spanish society. Although such writings cannot be contemplated within the limits of this essay, it is well to remember that Spanish historians shared similar intellectual attitudes (5). Thus, early twentieth-century Spanish historiography, written by an intellectual elite reeling from their
profound sense of Spanish decadence, impotence, and defeat, looked at Spanish history and saw only an "abyss of errors and sorrows" (6).

The II Spanish Republic (1931-36) was too short-lived and turbulent for any hopes of historiographical revisionism to materialize, and the forty-year long dictatorship of General Francisco Franco promoted a strong nationalistic bias in historical writing, marked by negative attitudes toward both international communism and American prepotency. Even without these internal factors, early Cold War nationalistic conservatism in the United States and then Castro's revolution in Cuba hardly encouraged mutual understanding or attempts to communicate and compare historical sources and perspectives. Spanish political and intellectual isolationism worked to reinforce the tradition of introspective, exceptionalist historiography. Language skills were relatively rare, and access to foreign historical works was difficult and patchy. Among American sources on the war of 1898, only a very few were known and cited (7).

The common denominator of this early historiography is that it concentrated almost exclusively on the domestic political aspects of the crisis, with barely a glance at the broader context of colonial policy or at conditions in the Spanish overseas provinces themselves. It offered much condemnation but little understanding of the roles played by European powers and the United States, or of the economic, strategic, and technological forces at work around the globe.

Most strikingly perhaps, although historians stressed the loss of Cuba, they paid little attention to the colonial autonomist and separatist movements. Some versions interpreted colonial separatism as racial warfare and/or a masonic conspiracy.

Neither was there any attempt to understand the role played by the United States. Throughout the crisis, the Spanish Federalist leader Francisco Pi y Margall struggled to understand and explain the American point of view, but Spanish historians tended to explain McKinley's intervention in terms that echoed the 1898 journalistic portrayal of supposed American faults: economic expansionism, arrogance, hegemonism, brutality, ignorance, hypocrisy, lack of spiritual values, and racism. Thus, these interpretations stressed illegal American aid to filibustering expeditions and to the Cuban rebels, as well as the role of the offensively anti-Spanish yellow press, McKinley's apparent weakness, his hypocritical escalating demands, his humanitarian justifications for intervention, the inflexibility of the American commissioners in Paris, and the greed displayed in the final terms of the peace treaty. The most outstanding exceptions to this anti-American trend were Pi and Labra (8).

One noticeable characteristic of traditional Spanish historiography on the wars of 1895-98 is the large number of studies written by non-professional authors. They are instead diplomats, military officers, Franciscan friars, or journalists. Some of these authors have benefitted from access to interesting primary sources of diverse nature, which they present or discuss in a useful manner, but often, too, the lack of professional expertise and a thorough knowledge of exist-
ing secondary sources diminishes the value of their work.

While traditional patriotic, military, or popular works are most in evidence, a number of recent contributions bring to light interesting new primary sources, or offer new data on soldiers serving in both the Cuban and the Spanish armies during the war (9). Others broach unusual and previously little-studied subjects, such as medical, scientific, and veterinary work (10). Finally, a few studies offer insights into the Spanish debate on militarism, military attitudes in the colonies, parliamentary discussions and government decisions regarding the army in Cuba, its recruitment, its cost, its supply, and the problem of Spanish soldiers returning from the war (11).

More encouragingly, the past twenty years have witnessed a remarkable evolution among professional Spanish historians. To be sure, the change did not "occur" suddenly in 1975, when the constitutional monarchy was established. Revisionism is rooted in the 1960s, while the traditional style is still alive and flourishing in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the liberating effects of Spanish evolution towards democracy and integration with Europe have undoubtedly accentuated the revisionist trend. The general sense that Spain is and always has been more "European" than has been recognized now holds sway, and undermines the old exceptionalist interpretations. Better libraries and greater academic freedom and mobility, often complemented by foreign language skills, have fostered a new awareness of foreign sources and historiography.

Of course, Spain's colonial crisis cannot be fully understood without reference to conditions in the Iberian peninsula, and Spanish historians still seek the ultimate causes of the crisis in the characteristics and weaknesses of Spanish social, political, and economic development. Nevertheless, a considerable number of wide-ranging modern scholars attempt to integrate domestic affairs with colonial policy and international relations in diverse ways. Revisionist studies of the social and political conditions in the peninsula, colonial policy, and global interpretations of the causes and immediate repercussions of the wars of 1895-98 in Spain have radically altered perspectives on the colonial crisis (12).

The influence of Marxism and the French Annales school made an impact on historiography in Spain at mid-century, leading to important studies of economic factors in Spanish history, promoted by Jaime Vicens Vives. Since then, the economic history of Spain and of its regions has been essentially rewritten, which has led to valuable, well-researched contributions to the study of colonial policy, tariffs, the formation of colonial fortunes and elites, Spanish economic interests in the colonies, and colonial economic development (13).

Several useful studies stress the importance of the Spanish merchant marine and especially of the Transatlántica Company in the development of colonial trade, the purchase of foreign-built steamships, defense, transportation of troops to the Caribbean and Pacific islands, and negotiation of war loans to the Spanish government (14). The financing of the war itself has also been the object of recent research (15).

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The social and economic focus of all these studies tends to impose a larger chronological framework, typically spanning from the 1880s (if not earlier) to 1910/14/20. The result is that they are far less obsessed with the date 1898 than traditional works, and indeed, such studies would seem to indicate that the wars of 1895-98 were much less disruptive than earlier historiography suggests. The monarchy did not collapse; Sagasta survived to lead new governments, and social and economic development continued along channels established long before. Indeed, contradicting the "disaster" complex, several studies indicate that returning Spanish emigrants and the repatriation of savings and investment capitals had some beneficial effects on the Spanish economy.

Another aspect connecting domestic, colonial, and international affairs is Spanish press coverage of the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American war. A good deal of work has been done using journalistic sources, although most of these studies concentrate on specific facets or phases of the crisis, or restrict their attention to a small selection of publications. As yet there is no overall study of Spanish journalistic responses to events of 1895-98. The primary source material available for such a project is daunting, considering that hundreds of periodical publications, representing a wide range of ideological and special interest groups, existed in Spain during this period (16).

Other studies focusing on particular responses during and immediately after the crisis offer interesting perspectives. As yet there is no global study of Spanish Catholic opinion, although small if acritical insights into certain ecclesiastical reactions are available (17).
New historians are also laying the groundwork for a better understanding of the role of the masonic movement in Caribbean and Filipino separatism and on opinions expressed in masonic publications in Spain during the final colonial crisis (18).

Of special interest is the relatively recent trend of Latin Americanist scholars in Spain to abandon the traditional Spanish imperial perspective, in favor of a greater interest in and sensitivity toward general conditions in the colonies and the construction of national identities before and after the sovereignty crisis of 1895-98. Research on the Spanish Caribbean in the nineteenth century has been a focus of recent publishing in Spain, and much of it is relevant for the longer view of Spanish colonial affairs and of autonomist and separatist movements (19).

Spanish emigration to Cuba and immigrant activities on the island are now receiving attention. Apart from his contributions to the social-military history of the wars in Cuba, Manuel de Paz, with José Fernández and Nelson López, takes the long view of the role of Canary Islander immigrants in Cuban banditry, rural discontent, and Cuban struggles for independence (20). Consuelo Naranjo studies the impact of American intervention in 1898 on Cuban political life but, like most modern Latin Americanists in Spain, is more interested in larger, longer-term issues such as immigration, race, national identity and culture (21). Dolores Domingo looks at the Latin American context (an unusual angle in Spanish historiography) in her study of Dominican support for Cuban separatism (22). Finally, Carmen García has written a useful analytical survey of Cuban historiography on the American intervention of 1898 (23).

Although Spanish historians have rarely taken much notice of Spain's presence in the Pacific, recent studies have brought to light new sources and focused on the dynamics of international interests and relations in the Pacific and the Far East that led up to and presided over the process of colonial redistribution resulting from the collapse of the Spanish empire. A number of studies examine Spanish colonial policy in the Pacific in the context of relations with Far Eastern powers, suggesting connections between the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95 and Spanish policy (24).
By contrast, there is still very little in-depth knowledge of social, economic, and political conditions in the United States (25). There is, to be sure, a much greater familiarity with American historiography on the war of 1898, but even so, little sense of the complexity of American points of view. The United States and/or President McKinley are still often personified as the villain. References to "expansionism" make much of the attitudes and interventions of Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt, with perhaps a reminder of Alfred Mahan's ideas thrown in for good measure, but with little detailed explanation of how these influences connect with policy decisions. Likewise, it is commonplace to find references to the historical interest shown by different American governments and interest groups in the acquisition of Cuba throughout the nineteenth century, and such precedents are taken as sufficient explanation of the events of 1898.

Most authors mention "economic motives" (sometimes identified simply as "American business" or as sugar interests)—the need for foreign investment markets to place excess American capital and/or for Caribbean and Far Eastern markets as outlets for American agricultural and industrial surpluses. Yet again, they do not clearly show the connections between such interests and actual policy. Spanish historians, like their American colleagues, may portray McKinley as a weak politician or as a determined expansionist, but rarely do they back up these evaluations with any relevant information about American domestic and party politics, regional characteristics and tensions, the relationship between Congress (particularly the Senate) and the President, or examples of McKinley's handling of journalists, representatives of special interest groups, and public opinion in general.

On the whole, Spanish historians do not make much attempt to understand or explain the American perspective in 1898, but then again, in the final analysis, they do not consider the United States to be the chief cause or culprit of Spain's imperial demise. More recent Spanish interpretations tend to see the United States as the opportunistic beneficiary of the collapse of Spanish power. Certainly, different aspects of American intervention and ultimate naval victory are underscored as added factors of stress that determined the timing and the outcome of the crisis, but they are not deemed fundamental to understanding its origins, its essential nature, and its repercussions in Spain. Spanish historians today have a greater sense of the inevitability of Cuban independence and a more pragmatic approach to international politics and American expansionism. Thus, the bare fact of American intervention in 1898 does not rankle so much as the perceived hypocrisy of McKinley's lack of transparency and of his humanitarian justifications.

Very few Spanish historians focus on particular aspects of American history connected with the wars of 1895-98; traditional interpretations are still dominant (26). Regarding the sinking of the Maine, most accept Admiral Rickover's conclusions that it was caused by an accidental internal explosion, but Guillermo Calleja leaves room for doubt (27). For their part, Sylvia Hilton and Steve Ickringill offer a comparative analysis of Cleveland's 1895 intervention in the Anglo-Venezuelan dispute and McKinley's intervention in the Spanish colonial crisis (28).

Looking at the role of the American press, Carmen González confirms the findings of earlier studies that midwest reporting was not as jingoistic as many Spanish historians suppose (29). However, Julián Companys continues to adhere to the conventional view that the "yellow" press played an important part in urging McKinley towards intervention, while Jesús Timoteo theorizes (with negligible historical evidence) that private interests in the United States planned and promoted a journalistic propaganda campaign designed to precipitate the war (30).

Conclusion

The overall theme of current Spanish historiography, then, remains that the colonial crisis was the inevitable result of structural weaknesses in the Spanish political, economic, and social system, which was unable to accommodate legitimate Cuban demands for autonomy. The modern version, however, does not harp so sorrowfully on Spanish decadence, nor does it cling to outworn exceptionalist interpretations. If reconstructions of the past are always a function of the present, then current optimism regarding Spain's democratic progress projects itself into reinterpretations of the nineteenth century. Scholars see Spanish political development in its European context, and a more positive evaluation of the achievements of the Restoration and its political and intellectual classes is beginning to appear. Within this context, the forces of nationalism in Spain and the colonies; economic interests in different regions of the peninsula; and the professional interests of military personnel, civil servants, and the Catholic Church each influenced successive Spanish governments' colonial policy. Economic factors, both within the Spanish empire and in world development, are now given due regard, offering interpretive frameworks that have nothing to do with the old themes of national honor and personal or party responsibilities. Similarly, as Spain's role in world affairs has become less defensive and more participative, the international context of 1898 has come to the forefront, offering broader, comparative and politically pragmatic perspectives that not only qualify the old view of 1898 as an exceptional national trauma, but also accommodate the legitimacy of colonial separatism.

Endnotes

1. Rafael M. de Labra, "De la representación e influencia de los Estados Unidos de América en el derecho internacional," 1 April 1877, in Discursos políticos, académicos y forenses. Segunda serie (Madrid: 1886), 172.

4. It is impossible to give a complete list here. Examples are: Severo Gómez Núñez, La guerra hispano-americana, 5 vols. (Madrid: 1898-1902); Manuel Corral, El desastre. Memorias de un voluntario en la campaña de Cuba (Barcelona: 1899); José Rodríguez Martínez, Los desastres y la regeneración de España. Relatos e impresiones (La Coruña: 1899); Damián Isern, Del desastre nacional y sus causas (Madrid: 1900); Valeriano Weyler, Mi mando en Cuba, 5 vols. (Madrid: 1910-11).

5. See, for example, Luis S. Granjel, La generación literaria del 98 (Salamanca: 1973); M. J. Oliver, La literatura del Desastre (Madrid: 1974).


7. Examples of traditional historiography from this period include: Leonor Meléndez Meléndez, Cánovas y la política exterior española (Madrid: 1944); Melchor Fernández Almagro, “Reacción popular ante el desastre,” Arbor 11, no. 36 (1948): 379-397; Santiago Galindo Herrero, El 98 de los que fueron a la guerra (Madrid: 1952).

8. Rafael María de Labra, El tratado de París de 1898 entre España y los Estados Unidos (Madrid: 1899); Francisco Pi y Margall and Francisco Pito Arsuaga, Historia de España en el siglo XIX, 7 vols. (Barcelona: 1902).


18. See, for example, Pere Sánchez, "La maçonnería catalana e el conflicte colonial cuba," L'Aven; 76 (1984); Manuel Adán Guanter, "La Logia Ibérica no. 7 y la independencia de Filipinas," in La masonería en la Historia de España (Zaragoza: 1985), 121-130.


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