
Book Review

Sebastian Balfour, Alejandro Quiroga, *The invention of Spain. Nation and Identity since Democracy*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2007, 239 pp.;

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After the death of Franco and up until the present day politicians, journalists, teachers and historians have attempted to offer explanations on how the Spanish political system works. If the transition was an ambitious plan that counted on ample support both within and outside of Spain, why does it still have repercussions on current policy in Spain contemporary society?

Historians Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga are both specialists in Contemporary Spanish policies. Balfour is Emeritus Professor of Contemporary Spanish Studies in the LSE's Department of Government. His major works are *The Politics of Contemporary Spain* which was edited by him in 2004 and *The invention of Spain. Nation and Identity since Democracy* is one of his important works which he has written with Alejandro Quiroga.

Quiroga is a Spanish historian, who is currently Lecturer in Spanish and European History at Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Newcastle University. His research field covers topics such as nationalism and ethnic conflict, Fascism and conservative political thought or the power of sports in contemporary Spain. The present book represents his major work, but he is also the author of several articles on Spanish nationalism.

Their book is based on a deconstructivist perspective which reveals how the text is always internally conflicted and is far from any definite meaning. They try to show how concepts of nationalism or identity clash and how this can generate multiple interpretations. It all starts with the question *Is Spain a Nation?*. And from here, they deconstruct the intricacies of concepts like nation, nationalism and identity. They agree on the idea that the unipolar identity imposed by Franco regime eroded the legitimacy of Spanish nationalism, because such a regime was full of totalitarian symbolism regarding

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the concept of nation. Hence, the result is that Spanish nationalism has had to undergo an implicit removal and to disguise itself in different forms.

The invention of Spain represents an important contribution on the Spanish national question from the transition to the present moment (which is 2007) and analyses conceptions about nation and identity in Spain and their use in everyday discourse since the end of Franco's regime in 1975. What makes this book even more appealing is the fact that it reunites a spectrum of contemporary Spanish politics from Franco's regime through conservative, left-wing parties and governments, to regional nationalists. The political system in Spain has become polarized over an array of issues, but none more so than the question of nation and identity. Therefore, these two concepts have been viewed through different lenses during the transition to democracy. Quiroga and Balfour argue that Franco's regime had profoundly discredited the concept of the Spanish nation by the mid-1970s and many in the left had embraced the cause of peripheral nationalism. Consequently, in 1975, the Communist Party of Spain's (PCE) manifesto defined the right of self-determination of Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia as *inalienable* (p.83). Both authors point out the representations of the nation concept from the past to its impact on the present, because in 1976, a year later, the (PSOE) went a step further and declared that *all nationalities and regions had the right to break free from the Spanish state* (p. 84) .

Meanwhile, a crisis of identity and governance in present-day Spain should be treated with scepticism because there are real problems relating to social cohesion and the role of the state in many situations. Balfour and Quiroga also argue that the issues of the Spanish politics have foundations in the Constitution of 1978. The debate over the concepts of the nation and identity is also framed by the Constitution, who is called *the touchstone of Spanish democracy* (p.56).

The book shows how Spain is now claimed by many to be a nation of nations and regions, a post-traditional nation state or a post-national state. For the peripheral nationalists, meaning Basque, Catalan, and Galician nationalists in particular, it is merely a state of nations and regions (p.139) . The authors point out that in Catalonia, for example, nationalism is the most pronounced and this region represents as a nation by virtue of its linguistic and historic distinctiveness. Catalan identity was constructed in opposition to Castile, a region considered responsible for hampering the progress of Catalonia. (p. 140) .

These being said, it is here that we can observe the deconstructivist approach challenging the argument of the writers and which casts doubt on most of the principles sustaining political parties. For the writers, the

emergence of Catalan and Basque nationalism changed everything because these movements created national identities that were not only alternative but, especially in the Basque case, antagonistic to the various Spanish national identities, while never defining them.

The shortfalls of such a work are precisely in its deconstructive perspective, because the authors do not assume any clear conclusion at the end of this approach, thus leaving all interpretations open to further debate.

The book under review here shares similarities in methodology with Gregorio Alonso's *The Politics and Memory of Democratic Transition* (2011) and Bonnie Field's *Politics and Society in Contemporary Spain* (2013), and all of them have established themselves with writing focusing on the relationship between the politics and the concepts of nation and identity. Even if it appeared before those other two, in 2007, Balfour and Quiroga's book is more complex, in terms of sources used, which includes references of a wide range of primary and secondary literature from Constitution, and different reports, to memoirs and letters of various politicians.

Written in an away which makes it easy to read, this book looks at these problems both as part of historical debate and as a contemporary political problem. During and since the transition, Spanish nationalist discourse has evolved to meet the challenge of new concepts of nation and identity, so this work represent an extremely important way to read the problems of Spanish contemporary society to find out the causes which triggered the effects of today's situation in Spain politics and society.