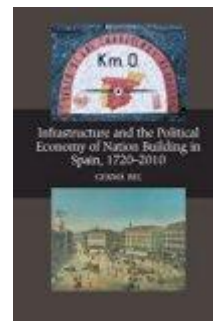


Germa Bel. *Infrastructure and the Political Economy of Nation Building in Spain, 1720-2010.* Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. xx + 172 pp. \$37.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-84519-532-8.



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The central argument of this brief book is that the development of Spain's infrastructure, at least since the advent of the Bourbon monarchy in the early eighteenth century, has had three characteristics. First, the relative weakness of the market and private capital has led to the primacy of the state in economic development. Second, the ends of this development have emanated from Madrid, with the capital as the intended hub. Finally, the model for Spanish infrastructure, whether in terms of roads, rail, or most recently, air travel, has been Paris. With a dynasty of French origin on the throne for much, although certainly not all, of these centuries, the Gallic influence should not be surprising. However, these three imperatives have been remarkably consistent, whether Spain was ruled by Bourbons, military dictators, or even democratic and constitutional governments. What is more, there has been a surprising consensus on the outlines of this infrastructure policy across both the Right and Left, within elected and nonelected governments and parties—even more

remarkable given the dramatic swings in power in Spain since the early eighteenth century.

This brief book summarizes the state of Spanish infrastructure in a breezy, conversational style—quite atypical for a volume deeply engaged in the issues of economics, state building, and national finance. The style, however, increases the accessibility of what might otherwise be an obtuse subject matter, delivered in this case effectively, if in limited form.

Within the broad outlines of the book, the focus is on transportation: road, rail, and airport infrastructure, as they were planned and implemented in Spanish history. These were, most certainly, “Spanish” efforts, designed as each was to centralize political and economic power in Madrid, the geographic, legal, and administrative capital of a notoriously diverse state of intense regionalism, underdeveloped infrastructure, distrust of the center, and challenging terrain.

Bel makes clear that the main priority of Spain's economic investments in roads, rail lines,

and airports has been to improve communications between Madrid and the provinces, principally through facilitating passenger traffic by all three methods. The most remarkable observation he makes--substantiated by evidence--is that these policies have been at the expense of critical investments in cargo capacity, as indispensable as this is for overall economic development. Consistent with other decisions made by successive Spanish governments and regimes, political considerations, in this case enhancing the centrality of Madrid, overruled actions that would have enhanced economic development. The underutilized AVE high-speed rail network, planned as a single web to unite even the least significant province to Madrid, comes at the expense of vital trunk lines and cargo capacity on the creaking and overburdened intermodal system for moving goods. Rail connections with Spain's ports--also in need of major investments--have also suffered relative neglect under the same political priorities.

While in some ways counterproductive in terms of the overall economy, these infrastructural priorities have succeeded over the centuries in transforming Madrid from merely the political and legal capital to the genuine economic capital of Spain. Madrid has not just increasingly become the hub of the national economy--a process accelerated even during the devolution of increasing powers to the provinces after the democratic transition. Madrid is not just the center of Spain, it is also now the richest, fastest-growing, and most developed region in the nation, a new characteristic for a state long characterized by greater wealth along some parts of the periphery, most notably Catalonia and the Basque regions.

Madrid became the unquestioned capital of Spain relatively late--only after 1606 was this selection not in doubt. When it was originally chosen in 1561, it was not the largest city in Castile, nor the most significant in any serious measure, whether religious importance, defensive terrain, economic attributes, or access to potable

water. Indeed, what was most remarkable about Madrid in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was how unremarkable it was. In this regard, it was an ideal choice--similar perhaps to the much later choice of Brasilia as Brazil's capital--in that it could be made to fit the demands of a new, centralizing state, lacking as it did local traditions and power centers that would mitigate against such efforts. Even so, the choice of an isolated city meant a serious commitment to investment, to connect the capital to its territories--an infrastructure that finally came to full fruition in the early twenty-first century, as the author demonstrates.

From the emphasis on a rail system with Madrid as its hub, to the disproportionate investments in the Madrid-Barajas airport, whose deficits continue to be heavily subsidized, to a system of roads that drives traffic to and through Madrid--the capital is more the center of Spain than at any time in its history. The author makes a convincing case that all of this is by design, a remarkable political unity from political leaders in Madrid, and the active focus of successful state policies since the early eighteenth century.

The main criticism of this book is its brevity. In fewer than 150 pages of text, including front matter, the author is able to do little more than present the most general of outlines--a few guiding principles, emblematic practices, and a handful of substantial policy discussions. Indeed, each of the several regimes discussed, whether the Bourbon monarchy, the various military dictatorships (including that of Franco) or the democratic state since the 1970s, could easily generate a volume of at least the same scope, and certainly more detail, than the present text. Even so, Bel's book is a good introduction to the subject of the economics of state formation, and should find its way into college libraries, as well as the collections of historians and social scientists interested in modern Spain, the development of the European economy, and questions of state formation.

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