Bridging Hispanism

In The Spirit of Hispanism: Commerce, Culture, and Identity across the Atlantic, 1875-1936, Diana Arbaiza studies Peninsular Hispanism, the movement that promoted closer ties between Spain and Spanish America based on the idea of a common cultural “spirit” (p. 9). One of the book’s main strengths is the joint consideration of the spiritual and material realms of Hispanism, which have usually been studied separately. By focusing on the “dialectic, tensions and interrelations” between them, Arbaiza successfully explains how both currents were entangled and equally relevant for envisioning and defining the “symbolic and material regeneration of Spain” (p. 4). Arbaiza’s wide textual evidence—ranging from European political economy and various texts from Spanish intellectuals to correspondence, periodical publications, and memories from congresses—allows her to carefully explain the “imbrications” and “ideological disentanglements” of Hispanism (pp. 189, 14).

In five chapters, Arbaiza addresses different expressions of the movement from the Restoration (1874-1923) to the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which coincide with the “rise and fall” of Hispanism as a somewhat coherent project. This periodization effectively decents 1898 as the sole reference for examining Spain’s imperial decline and is key to one of the book’s purposes: to show that Hispanism was not empty rhetoric but a complex and evolving movement that sought to and struggled to harmonize the pragmatic needs for modernization with the spiritual allusions to the Hispanic race. As Arbaiza shows, the idea of a common “spirit” that purportedly united Spain and Spanish America not only was “elusive” and “imprecise” but was also understood differently by Hispanists, even by those who belonged to the same current of the movement (p. 65). The careful and thorough examination of these tensions and transformations is a noteworthy accomplishment.

Arbaiza’s intellectual history is a grounded and compelling study of not only Peninsular Hispanism but also its connections to nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism. She argues that Peninsular Hispanism was an “ideology of neoimperialistic character” insofar as it was a “symbolic substitute” for the geopolitical and material power that Spain lacked (pp. 8-9). With that said, the terms “imperialism” and “colonialism” are rather conflated in the book, and they could have been
further problematized. Arbaiza argues that Spanish entrepreneurs and intellectuals envisioned a shift from a model of territorial domination to one of economic and cultural hegemony, and thus the movement was intrinsically connected to the birth of capitalist modernity. Yet that conclusion raises a few questions. Why was the previous model of domination not connected to modern capitalism? And isn’t that clear-cut transition from one model to the next too linear-stagist? I also wonder about the place of the Philippines in this story. Even though Peninsular Hispanism explicitly stressed the rapprochement with Spanish America, the Philippines’ absence in The Spirit of Hispanism is surprising given Arbaiza’s more general intervention about Spain’s “postcolonial” and “neoimperial” projects.

The first two chapters serve as a scaffold for understanding how the economic narrative of Hispanism originated as a defensive, vindicative, and “compensatory” discourse: one of the book’s main arguments (p. 3). While the first chapter examines broad debates about political economy and the sociology of religion, the second one zooms into events that spurred the rewriting of Spanish colonial history: the Centennial of 1892, the Chicago Exposition of 1893, and the Spanish-American War of 1898. Arbaiza demonstrates how critiques of bullionism or conceptions of Spain’s indolence engendered an image of the country as unsuited for the age of commerce, and how Spanish intellectuals responded by redefining Spain’s colonial enterprise as a civilizing, altruistic mission, and the Hispanic as an anti-materialist race.

The next three chapters overlap temporally as they address different currents of Hispanism. In chapter 3, Arbaiza focuses on the trajectories and texts of Rafael María de Labra, Luis de Olariaga, and Rafael Altamira and traces the transformation of progressive Hispanism from the initial enthusiasm of intellectuals and entrepreneurs to their disillusionment of the late 1920s. Throughout the decade, she explains, progressive Hispanists faced increasing criticism about their “lyrism” and their inability to demonstrate how cultural rapprochement would spur trade (and not the inverse). In this chapter, as in all others, Arbaiza examines carefully how Hispanists grappled with criticism and changing material circumstances, which usually exacerbated frustrations and splits within the movement. Chapter 4 has an analytical depth that other chapters lack due to its narrow focus on the texts and trajectory of Ramiro de Maeztu. By considering his earlier works and not solely his well-known Defensa de la Hispanidad (1934), Arbaiza underscores the continuities in his attempts to reconcile economy and morality, a conundrum that loomed over all Hispanists. While the progressive Hispanists studied in chapter 3 advanced a “Krausist conception of economy” that linked commercial activities to “moral principles,” Maeztu crafted a “Hispanic form of capitalism” that rejected the liberal market and envisioned an economy directed by “the principle of Catholic salvation” (pp. 116, 175-76).

Arbaiza’s various analytical scales—from broad European debates to a specific current of the movement, to a singular figure—demonstrate her cautious engagement with different historiographies as well as the breadth of her analysis. But they explain, too, the unevenness of certain discussions. The last chapter, where Arbaiza explores the “commercial” branch of Hispanism from Catalonia and Biscay is a case in point. By examining the promotion of commerce in the magazine Mercurio, the book trade, and Spanish migration to Spanish America, Arbaiza showcases the multiple efforts of Hispanists in furthering trading enterprises. Up to that chapter, The Spirit of Hispanism had not pondered much about the spatial character or reach of the movement, which is certainly a longed-for intervention. Yet, by referring to intellectuals and entrepreneurs from Catalonia and Biscay as “Hispanists from the periphery,” Arbaiza reinforces spatial constructs and reifies Madrid as the center (p. 188). The scope of this chapter, in fact, raises questions regarding the
spatial dimension of Hispanism and Arbaiza’s analytical distinctions. I wonder, for instance, if indeed commercial Hispanism was as spatially bounded as chapter 5 conveys, or if all other forms of Hispanism could in fact be considered “Castilian” (p. 191). As this last chapter shows, Hispanism not only was an ideologically fractured, ever-changing movement but was also spatially differentiated. It is worth considering then, if a more spatially attuned analysis would have provided other interpretations. Take, for instance, the examination of the book trade. Although Arbaiza provides a good overview of the debates around intellectual property rights and piracy, she misses the opportunity to explain how editors from Barcelona and Madrid converged and diverged in their approaches to conquering the Spanish American market. Catalanian editors, in fact, were not alone in their efforts to “reconcile the fostering of art and the pursuit of profit” and it is thus unclear what was specifically “commercial” about them (p. 215). Saturnino Calleja, from Madrid, one of the main advocates of the Asociación de la Librería de España is a case in point.

The array of topics addressed in the last chapter also prompts another question: why isn’t there a section on the Spanish language? From the late nineteenth century, Spanish (el castellano) was envisioned by many intellectuals and government officials (many of whom were Hispanists) as one of the “natural” bonds that united Spain and Spanish America, and more widely, as an avenue and tool for Spain’s regeneration. Not surprisingly, the Office of Cultural Relations asked diplomatic officers to fill in a questionnaire of the state of the Spanish language and culture in 1922.[1] A discussion about el castellano, even if brief, would have been an opportunity to problematize the center-periphery binary, and the competing linguistic identities in Spain, strengthening the book’s arguments on nationalism and imperialism.

With that said, Arbaiza’s acute and clear historiographical interventions and the breadth of her analysis make The Spirit of Hispanism an important contribution to discussions about global capitalism (and Spain’s role in it), the relation between literature and the economy, and the intellectual and cultural history of the Atlantic world. The book serves, too, as an invitation for bridging the historiographies of Spain and Spanish (Latin) America—even when Arbaiza overlooks crucial authors like Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra—which usually disentangle after the Age of Revolutions despite the ongoing connections of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Spirit of Hispanism is a careful and enlightening example of how to combine the analysis of cultural production with broader discussions about political economy. Thus, it is a relevant book not only for scholars of Spain but also for people interested in Atlantic history and the role of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism in the making of the modern world.

Note

[1]. See Sección de Exteriores (10), boxes 54/1276 and 54/1277, Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares, Spain.
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