

Mateo Ballester Rodríguez. *La identidad española en la Edad Moderna (1556–1665): Discursos, símbolos y mitos.*

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Most contemporary historiography on the origins of nation building and nationalism falls into one of two camps. On one side are those historians who see the nation-state as a civic phenomenon, only recently willed into being by political concepts (like mass citizenship) and programs of social engineering (like mass education) that scarcely existed prior to the nineteenth century. On the other side are those who define the nation-state as an ethnic phenomenon, the timeless, organic expression of deeply felt bonds of lineage, language, and culture already present long before the modern era — in some cases, as far back as ancient Israel. In this battle between civic modernists and ethnic perennialists, the modernists lately seem to have won, and this clearly bothers Mateo Ballester Rodríguez, author of a new study of nation formation in early modern Spain. “The mere admission that one is researching . . . the national phenomenon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” he laments, “today is met with expressions of shock, incredulity, and even reproach that one has fallen into the grasp of ‘essentialism’ — a word which, by its mere enunciation, disqualifies any assertion of a premodern national identity” (14).

For Ballester Rodríguez, as for many other perennialists, the modernist position is weakest when it relies upon tautologies and semantic gymnastics in order to deny that something approaching nationalism already existed in the consciousness, if not the vocabulary, of early modern Europeans. (The approach is perhaps best captured by Eric Hobsbawm’s attempt to survey dictionary definitions of the word *nation* to prove that Europeans did not share our understanding — by implication, the proper understanding — of nationalism until the late nineteenth century.) Ballester Rodríguez argues that this refusal to acknowledge premodern nationalism is guilty of two species of anachronism. First, it is “archaizing,” simply assuming against considerable evidence to the contrary that nonnational dynasties and the Church must have been the sole collectivities capable of inspiring loyalty and patriotism among early modern Europeans. At the same time, the modernist approach is also “modernizing,” imputing to premodern actors deeply invested in “religio-providential” ways of thinking the same secular, economic motivations

typically ascribed to modern politicians (288). As a result of this double anachronism, Ballester Rodríguez observes, other historians misunderstand the intentions and valences of their early modern sources, failing to notice that behind “certain uses of the terms *patria* and *nación* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain we can find the same central content as in their current usage” (58). Ballester Rodríguez, by contrast, can “affirm the existence in that period of national identities or patriotic sentiments”; indeed, the reigns of Philip II, Philip III, and Philip IV here become fertile ground for “an intensification of the national project, as we understand it, in four fundamental dimensions” (58, 37). The early modern period, Ballester Rodríguez suggests, produced its own kind of nationalism, not merely a defective or embryonic version of the nationalism more familiar to us.

*La identidad española* is a rich and polyphonic dive into the sources, ranging across numerous genres of early modern communication — medicine, general history, biblical exegesis, theatrical comedy, and linguistics — in its core chapters (4–7) alone. Ballester Rodríguez does as well as one could hope to assemble this plethora of authors and formats into a reasonably unified picture of national culture in late Renaissance Spain, and the resulting mosaic makes a persuasive case for the moderate version of his argument: that the early modern centuries, if not quite the birthplace of nationalism as we would understand it, were nevertheless tremendously productive of the peninsula-wide legends, tropes, and canons that subsequent generations of patriots would deploy in the service of more self-consciously political projects of national unification. Indeed, Ballester Rodríguez’s extended discussion of Huarte de San Juan’s 1575 *Examen de ingenios* (chapter 4) is particularly well done, and may be a pleasant surprise to readers who would like to know more about that most dubious of modern fascinations, the “national character” of peoples.

At the same time, however, this book is not without its problems. At a general level, for an author so versed in the historiography and so avowedly hostile to anachronism, there is a surprising wooliness here as to the precise definitions of *nationalism*, *national sentiment*, *patriotism*, and so on. At times these words mean different things; at other times, they all stand more or less for the same diffuse sense of peninsular pride. This ambiguity raises the question about the value of engaging in these semantic debates about the origins of nationalism. Whether or not Ballester Rodríguez has proven his case about the existence of “national identity” in early modern Spain, he does not seem to have recalibrated the terms in which historians of nationalism read early modern sources after all. The premodern expressions of national sentiment that Ballester Rodríguez takes such pains to excavate (many of which, as noted, appeared not in works about Spain, but rather about humoral medicine or ancient Israel) end up looking quite a bit like earlier, less developed versions of modern nationalism. The teleological narrative (or “modernizing anachronism”) prevails.

If Ballester Rodríguez’s reconstruction of nationalism is thus conventional or teleological, so too is his interpretation of Spanish history. Against recent trends in Iberian historiography to emphasize the multiple different Spains that existed, or

might have existed, in the minds and hearts of premodern Spaniards of every faith, class, and region, Ballester Rodríguez sees a “red thread” of unity, continuity, and conformity that leads inevitably toward the Spain of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, for example, we should understand the many centuries of Muslim-Christian coexistence in the Middle Ages not as a possible alternative version of Spain, but rather as pauses in a single war of Christian *reconquista* that aimed from the start for “the very concrete *restoration of Hispania*” (96). In fact, it is extremely hard to know what, if anything, contemporaries thought about the Reconquest, since it was only really conceived as such in the sixteenth century, once historians could be sure that it had more or less concluded. This problem — of knowing what the people thought or felt about their homeland in the sixteenth century (let alone the thirteenth) — is one of the most intractable obstacles for any historian aspiring to gauge national identity or national sentiment in the early modern period. At several points, Ballester Rodríguez’s desire to reconstruct a shared national culture out of literary remains leads him to whitewash the rich culture of dissent that, thanks to historians like Stefania Pastore, we know existed in Spain’s Golden Age (69). Ballester Rodríguez admits this, noting that even as Spaniards from different regions of the peninsula grew more accustomed to living together at home, they remained ill at ease with each other abroad, especially in the Americas (116). There are a number of ways in which the historical experience of Spain could be used to make novel and interesting interventions in the somewhat tired historiography on nations and nationalism. Ballester Rodríguez has much to offer, but a more successful book might try less intently to make Spain fit the mold of its European neighbors.

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