

Structures and Agents: The Concept of “Bourgeois Revolution” in Spain

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In my view, the standard assumption of an unusually late and exceptionally uneven modernity in the case of Spain is false. This assumption has held currency at various times and for various reasons throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Efforts to change the orthodox understanding of Spanish modernity, however, can have no real chance of success unless we manage to reverse a more basic set of assumptions that clearly underwrite the notion of Spain's excessively delayed and excessively fitful coming of age. Indeed, the concept of “modernity” in general remains inextricably bound to notions of “bourgeois revolution” and “capitalist development.” Since both “bourgeoisie” and “modernization” are widely held to be late and weak in Spain, it comes as no surprise that the normalized description of “Spanish modernity” is, well, that it is late and weak.

Given the current state of affairs in literary and historical studies, the nineteenth century in Spain might as well be labeled “the century that has no name!” We believe we can speak or write with a certain degree of intellectual precision about the nature of the Golden Age, of early modernity, of the Baroque, of the medieval period—even of the *posguerra* and *posfranquismo*. Of course, these periodizing categories also invite hard questions and can display a conceptual wobbliness when subjected to the shake, rattle, and roll of contemporary theory. But none of them rivals “the nineteenth century” for the kind of sheer conceptual instability caused by the lack of a basic agreement over just what kind of animal “the nineteenth-century” really is:

El siglo de la burguesía, el liberalismo y la revolución industrial como trilogía de un proceso global de ruptura, ha sido puesto en cuestión por otras categorías que asignan a la centuria un carácter de pervivencias de un mundo anterior. (Bahamonde y Martínez 13)

This is not to say that there have not been dominant positions on the character of the nineteenth century at one time or another. A broadly marxist view of the century as a revolutionary period enjoyed significant intellectual purchase during the 1960s and 70s (Clavero; Sebastià). Beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing throughout the 90s, the view that increasingly comes to dominate Spanish historiography—and, by transmission, the view that increasingly influences Spanish literary criticism—represents an eclectic position. Both transformation and continuity are recognized, but they are figured into a non-revolutionary balance sheet that emphasizes gradualism and the incompleteness of change in nineteenth-century Spain (Álvarez Junco, Cruz). Such a position is reflected compactly by Angel Bahamonde and Jesús Martínez at the beginning of their *Historia de España. Siglo XIX* (1994):

A lo largo del siglo XIX la configuración del sistema político liberal, pues, adquirió un tono reformista *desde arriba* y oligárquico con el asentamiento de las élites que eran producto de la confluencia de tradición y modernidad, abandonándose las alternativas populares y democráticas. También quedó en elaboración teórica la movilidad social con el dibujo secular de los infranqueables límites de la sociedad abierta. La desarticulación del Antiguo Régimen en sus aspectos jurídicos había implicado la definición

y construcción de un nuevo Estado, que administrativamente recogía una herencia dieciochesca. Pero todo ello no quiere decir que la sociedad española sufriera una mutación global en el sentido de ruptura con un mundo anterior. Las élites del dinero y del poder se reordenaron, sin que existiera una sustitución global de élites, mientras el camino de la industrialización y de las pautas tan queridas por el liberalismo económico sólo se consolidaron lentamente en un privilegiado núcleo de territorios. (Bahamonde y Martínez 23)

Of course, there are a number of points in this passage with which one can agree. But what may astonish at least some readers, and what should prove symptomatic to all, remains the overall disappearance of terms such as “revolution,” “bourgeois,” “social class,” and even “capitalism” from Bahamonde’s and Martínez’s summary description of Spain’s nineteenth century.

Jesús Cruz’s *Gentlemen, Bourgeois, and Revolutionaries: Political Change and Cultural Persistence Among the Spanish Dominant Groups 1750-1850* (1996) is the most recent study to articulate this new revisionist paradigm for nineteenth-century Spain. Cruz’s debt of inspiration to revisionist historiography on the French Revolution is clear: “It has been more than three decades since Cobban suggested that seeing the major conflict in eighteenth-century France as a clash between a feudal aristocracy and a capitalist bourgeoisie was an insufficient or, rather, an incorrect way of explaining the French Revolution” (265). Before engaging specific arguments in *Gentlemen, Bourgeois, and Revolutionaries*, therefore, it is helpful to provide some indication of how a marxist

understanding of the French Revolution has been challenged by revisionist historians, especially in the 1980s and 90s.

The marxist view holds that “the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, driven by class conflict, which swept away the political structures of feudalism and cleared the way for the development of capitalism. Not all those who advocated this view considered themselves Marxists but their interpretations of the revolution drew heavily on Marxism” (McGarr 113). To this view revisionists such as François Furet, T.C.W. Blanning, and George Comninel reply, in essence, that the French Revolution shows no meaningful connections either to the bourgeoisie or to the development of capitalism. Paul McGarr, a defender of the marxist interpretation of the revolution, sums up the revisionist case as follows:

It is that the revolution cannot be seen as a bourgeois revolution which destroyed feudal political structures. The revisionists insist that class struggle played little role in the revolution and that the revolution had nothing much to do with the development of capitalism.

The revisionists also argue that the nobility and bourgeoisie were part of a single ruling “élite” of “notables”—though they are woolly about what exactly is meant by these terms. This “élite” was primarily made up of landowners and there was no fundamental social divide or conflict within it. Indeed all of the “élite” were in favour of reform, and if only people had been a little more sensible, political reform was possible without social upheaval. The revolution thus becomes merely a squabble among this relatively homogeneous élite over political power, a squabble not rooted in any social base

but fuelled by the “autonomous political and ideological dynamic” of a struggle between “sub-élites,” as Furet puts it.

This focus goes along with a turn away from seeing revolution as having anything much to do with the underlying social conditions of the mass of people. (McGarr 114)

Like other revisionists in relation to French history, Cruz explicitly questions the application of the notion of bourgeois revolution to Spain (266). In the first place, any such revolution would have to be conceived of as a “liberal” rather than as a “bourgeois” revolution. Marxist historians, Cruz argues, attempt to reduce too many socially disparate types of individuals to a single social class:

According to these historians, the nobleman who liberated his *mayorazgo*, the urban artisan using free contracting to run his shop, the Catalan industrialist, and the high government official of noble ancestry all belonged to the same socially ascendant group: the bourgeoisie.... [Nevertheless,] the diversity found in their social origins, the nature and origin of their wealth, and their social behavior, leads me to think that they did not constitute a new social class. (270-71)

Cruz goes on to claim that “whether they were a bourgeoisie or not is irrelevant” since “the concept of bourgeoisie... as it has been used in Europe to define the groups that dismantled the old regime is in all respects insufficient” (271).

Cruz holds instead that the groups who dismantled the *antiguo régimen* should be viewed as a “conglomerate of classes that were characterized by their socially dominant position” (271). Indi-

vidual members of this conglomerate are said to have found themselves attracted to the "message of modernization and progress" (276) they perceived in liberalism and "wanted to follow the example of countries like England or North America, where the new system seemed to be producing positive results" (276). Cruz's other main reason for rejecting the concept of "bourgeois revolution" when applied to nineteenth-century Spain consists of his view that, whatever process of capitalist transformation may have occurred, it was neither revolutionary in nature nor was it brought anywhere near to completion in the nineteenth century. Echoing Álvarez Junco (1985), Cruz asserts:

If what we mean by bourgeois revolution is a violent change that causes political, social, and economic upheaval, then there were, indeed, very few bourgeois revolutions. In most countries capitalist transformation has occurred slowly and unevenly, the entire process sometimes lasting over a century. History has shown that evolutionary processes, and not revolutions, are what have moved capitalism, and so we always have to look out for the 'peculiar' nature of each case.

In the case of Spain this process has lasted some one hundred and sixty years. Applying the term "revolution" to the process is, then, simply making historical pieces fit into a puzzle that is in itself a poor tool for the study of history. (267)

It is important to note that Cruz, like Álvarez Junco before him, here suggests the improbable view that Spain cannot be considered a "capitalist" country until the 1960s or early 70s. Now, to the immediate point that capitalist transformations unfold over time periods greater

than that of bourgeois revolutions, marxists can only retort: "Well, of course, bourgeois revolution and the development of capitalism are not identical processes." Bourgeois revolutions did not originate capitalism; capitalism had been developing long before any of them took place. Capitalism also continues to develop following bourgeois revolutions; after all, the effect of bourgeois revolutions is to create conditions for capitalist development. Cruz's larger point in this passage, however, emphasizes that historians and literary critics should repudiate any meaningful causal relationships between bourgeois revolutions and capitalist transformations. And in such a case marxists obviously disagree.

There exist, I think, quite devastating criticisms of the revisionist position, both with regard to the French Revolution and to what I do not hesitate to call the nineteenth-century "bourgeois revolution" in Spain. Such criticisms involve: first, the ways in which revisionists misconstrue the marxist interpretation of bourgeois revolution; second, the facts which revisionists misrepresent or simply ignore; and, third, the methodological mistakes they make at the level of philosophy of social science. I am unable to address all of the relevant concerns on this occasion, but I will endeavor to highlight an especially important one for each type of criticism.

Revisionists might be forgiven for misconstruing crucial aspects of the classical Marxist position on bourgeois revolution. As Paul McGarr reminds us, there is

... a weakness in the orthodox tradition, as exemplified here by Soboul. All the historians in this tradition drew on what they believed was some ver-

sion of Marxism. Unfortunately it was really Stalinism. This meant a tendency towards a mechanical, deterministic approach. At times reading some of their work gives the impression that all was preordained, that history inevitably progresses and that, at the appointed hour, a revolutionary bourgeoisie with a fully formed consciousness of what it is fighting for springs up and seizes power. (115)

The issue of revolutionary consciousness retains enormous relevance for our purposes because the primary argument that Cruz deploys against the concept of “bourgeois revolution” derives from his view that events in Spain do not pit a homogeneous and fully class-conscious bourgeoisie against a homogeneous and fully class-conscious aristocracy. Against Cruz, however, it must be affirmed that leading figures of Marxism—figures such as Marx, Lenin, or Trotsky—do not consider the dialectic of class and consciousness, even in revolutionary situations, to manifest itself in so undifferentiated a manner.¹ Alex Callinicos is right, therefore, to argue that revisionist claims are “damaging to Marxism only on condition that we conceive bourgeois revolution as necessarily the result of the self-conscious action of the capitalist class” (Callinicos 122).

But that is not how the classical marxist tradition, at its best and most coherent, actually conceives of bourgeois revolution. Defending the concept of “bourgeois revolution” from revisionist attacks, Callinicos emphasizes rather:

... bourgeois revolutions are transformations which create the political conditions of capitalist domination. As such, they are not necessarily the work of the bourgeoisie itself, but can be

achieved by a variety of different forces. Moreover, there is no single pattern of bourgeois revolution. (116, my emphasis)

To explain what this means in the Spanish context, one could do worse than to turn Cruz’s words against him, for a hallmark of revisionist writers is that they usually supply evidence which refutes their own arguments. Cruz presents a list of groups, for example, which are supposedly so diverse that they cannot be said to have constituted a social class during the first third of the nineteenth century: old noblemen, artisans, industrialists, bureaucrats. Nevertheless, Cruz subsequently affirms that, prior to the great changes of the period, these different groups “were already united by a community of interests that, if not social, were definitely political and economic” owing to the crisis of Spanish feudalism (272). Cruz even admits that within the central group of the political and administrative élite many individuals, “although they were not themselves capitalists, followed those who were changing laws that favored the development of capitalism...” (271).

The means by which these political and juridical changes were actually secured demonstrates the specific character of bourgeois revolution in Spain and also recalls the most important reality about the 1830s that revisionists downplay or even ignore. For Callinicos, the historical record provides two main variants of bourgeois revolution:

... the classical bourgeois revolutions (Holland 1572, England 1640, America 1776, France 1789) in which broad coalitions of small producers were mobilized to smash the old order; and the bourgeois ‘revolu-

tions from above' (German and Italian unification, the American civil war of 1861-65, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 in Japan) in which the existing state apparatus was used to remove the obstacles to bourgeois domination. (116)

Spain adheres most closely to the second main variant, and this fact suggests what the revisionist account often empties from the Spanish context. No entry covering "Carlism" or "war," for example, appears in the index to Cruz's *Gentlemen, Bourgeois, and Revolutionaries*. Yet not only fighting and but also winning the Carlist War qualify as necessary conditions for establishing the liberal state in Spain. Insofar as it involved the use of an "existing state apparatus... to remove the obstacles to bourgeois domination," the Carlist War dramatizes, as do the numerous popular uprisings during the 1830s and 40s, that class struggle cannot simply be wished away by revisionist discourse. And the presence of nobles in both the liberal and Carlist camps destroys any view that real conflicts did not exist among those whom revisionists refer to *en bloc* as the "élite."

Methodologically, the issue to raise with revisionists once again concerns their insistence that the so-called "liberal revolution" in Spain was not—and could not have been—"bourgeois" because it resulted from the actions of a variety of individuals who behaved as they did without a fully-formed, unified class consciousness. Nevertheless, the relation between structures and agents in the case of bourgeois revolutions need not be based on intentions, much less transparent ones. To follow the formulations of Anthony Giddens, social structures can represent the unanticipated consequences of the actions

of individuals or groups, as well as the unacknowledged conditions that enable them to act (69-70). The first component of Giddens's definition of structure eliminates the requirement of conscious intention on the part of those making the bourgeois revolution in Spain (though some Spanish revolutionaries surely harbored such intentions).

The second component of his definition—namely, that social structure is not to be conceptualized merely as a barrier to action but rather as essentially involved in the production of action—directly addresses the reality of Spain's revolutionaries as a social class already partly formed and partly in formation. As Cruz shows, the diverse group of "élites" who accomplished what he calls the "liberal" revolution succeeded in doing so because they enjoyed structurally dominant social positions. The individuals occupying such positions—again, Cruz confirms this—followed the lead of those among them who sought to push change in the direction of capitalist transformation. In this precise sense, they can be said to gravitate toward an objectively given class center at the same time as they subjectively participate in a process of class self-constitution. As Cruz himself describes, those who made the Spanish revolution of the nineteenth century undertook to do so "because they truly wanted to improve Spanish society and *because it was economically and socially beneficial to do so*" (276, my emphasis). The social form and content of this class then acquires a sharper profile as specific tasks and challenges are taken up.

By way of summary, it proves useful to return to the main source of the revisionist approach to Spain's nineteenth century, José Álvarez Junco's influential essay, "Sobre el concepto de Revolución

Burguesa" (1985). Álvarez Junco attempts to show that "el caso español es un claro ejemplo de la inaplicabilidad del concepto de Revolución Burguesa" (145). There are three main components to his argument. First, like those who follow in his footsteps, Álvarez Junco borrows his analytic framework from the revisionist interpretation of the French Revolution. Thus he emphasizes the lack of a large and self-conscious capitalist class in Spain—particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century—in order to dismiss the idea that a Spanish "bourgeois revolution" takes place at any point in the 1800s. In fact, Álvarez Junco regards the establishment of capitalism and the achievement of bourgeois hegemony in Spain as an evolutionary rather than revolutionary occurrence: "Lo que se inició en 1808 no se puede considerar terminado hasta prácticamente ayer, con la industrialización de los años sesenta y la transición política de los últimos setenta" (145).²

Second, Álvarez Junco holds that Marx and Engels viewed the French Revolution as the universal paradigm of bourgeois revolution. He then proceeds to recite differences between the French and English Revolutions, as well as differences between the French and American Revolutions, in order to claim that "sólo en Francia se ha producido una Revolución Burguesa típica" (145). This rhetorical move allows him to deny validity to any general concept of "bourgeois revolution." Finally, his third criticism consists of the assertion that a "bourgeois revolution" must entail not only a political or juridical transformation but also economic and social transformations. While it is possible to point to rapid, violent, and deep political change in the context of the so-called bourgeois revolutions, attention to

the pace, depth, and character of social and economic changes reveals that they unfold over a protracted period of time:

El cambio es complejo; se combinan en él varios niveles (políticos, económicos, sociales, culturales), que nunca son simultáneos, y el conjunto de la operación resulta lento, más evolutivo que revolucionario. (147)

Sufficient argument has already been presented in this essay against the objection to applying the concept of "bourgeois revolution" to Spain based on the lack of a substantial and self-conscious capitalist class. The point that the classical marxist tradition does not employ the French Revolution as a universal model, and that it instead posits two main variants of bourgeois revolution, has also been emphasized. Álvarez Junco's last objection to the concept of "bourgeois revolution," however, requires a brief response.

This objection boils down to the fact that profound economic or social change may not immediately accompany the political changes associated with the experience of bourgeois revolutions. But no marxist (especially those of us still committed to some version of the base/superstructure distinction) would claim that thorough-going social and cultural change takes place overnight—even on the "morning after" a revolution.³ It is, moreover, disingenuous on Álvarez Junco's part to require that full economic transformation occur simultaneously with bourgeois political revolution in order to be able to speak of *real* "bourgeois revolution." After all, such revolutions are precisely aimed at "unfettering" the productive forces: "Bourgeois revolutions," to reiterate Callinicos's formulation, "are transforma-

tions which create the political conditions of capitalist domination.” Without the establishment of such political conditions, there cannot be further development of the productive forces in a capitalist direction, nor can there be general transformations in the ideological and scientific spheres displaying specifically “bourgeois” characteristics.

Only on the unwarranted condition that the concept of “bourgeois revolution” be made to stand or fall on the simultaneity of profound change throughout all instances of the social formation—political, economic, and social—can Álvarez Junco make a case for the emptiness of the term “bourgeois revolution.” Indeed, he himself understands that, should this condition be removed, a precise reality of bourgeois revolution in Spain comes into view. After asserting that the term “bourgeois revolution” cannot be applied to Spain, for example, Álvarez Junco poses the following alternative:

Porque o bien [la Revolución Burguesa en España] se reduce a las transformaciones legislativas que <<liberan>> las actividades económicas y los medios de producción (abolición de mayorazgos y vinculaciones, disolución de gremios y monopolios comerciales), y en este caso podrá situarse en unas fechas bastante precisas; o bien se añaden procesos económicos propiamente dichos de desarrollo técnico (y sólo éstos se pueden dar lugar al surgimiento de una burguesía)... y en este segundo caso las transformaciones, habrá de reconocerse, han sido lentas.... (145, my emphasis)

Álvarez Junco clearly favors the second option, but he is forced to acknowledge that earlier historians (particularly Clavero

and Sebastià) have successfully located Spain’s bourgeois revolution in the years 1834-1843 (1835-1837 in Clavero’s case) based on their reasoning that the concept of “bourgeois revolution” exactly designates a transformation that “creates the political conditions of capitalist domination.”

I should like to conclude by asking whether literary and cultural critics should bother to care about the question of “bourgeois revolution” in Spain. I believe that we should, and deeply so. Interestingly, at the end of *Gentlemen, Bourgeois and Revolutionaries*, Cruz decides once and for all to reject the idea of a nineteenth-century “bourgeois revolution” in Spain because, on his view, the “liberal revolution” (which he does acknowledge to have occurred) does not immediately produce a bourgeois culture—especially a bourgeois *habitus*, or culture of private, everyday life.

Social practice cannot be reduced to simply being a set of relations of production or laws. It must also take into account cultural relations, which Spanish historians have failed to do.... What they have failed to take into account is that there also exists a private discourse that is just as important as [political practices and public discourse] when it comes to defining the behavior of social groups. (274-75)

I believe that Cruz underestimates here the nature and extent of cultural change in Spain during the 1830s and 40s. Moreover, any delay in creating a bourgeois *habitus* in the wake of the profound political changes that obviously do take place between 1835 and 1843 could never justify dispensing with the concept of “bourgeois revolution” in the Spanish context.

Yet Cruz's insistence on the importance of cultural relations for our efforts to analyze the significant transformations that characterize nineteenth-century Spain remains wholly apt.

In this light, we may recall that it is to "literature" that there falls the social task of shaping an inner world of feelings and beliefs for the subjects of Spain's new "liberal"—or, better still, the new bourgeois—state. One of the most important tasks of Hispanic cultural studies today, therefore, remains the attempt to understand the place and function of literature within the nexus of culture and class. One such nexus no doubt is represented by the historical experience we call "modernity," a phenomenon that begins to be experienced in Spain with the bourgeois revolution of the 1830s.

Notes

¹For example, Lenin writes in July 1916 concerning the shape of proletarian revolution:

To imagine that social revolution is *conceivable* without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against all national oppression, etc.—to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, "We are for socialism," and another, somewhere else and says, "We are for imperialism," and that will be a social revolution! ... Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip service to revolution without understanding what revolution is. (355-56)

Lenin describes those who believe that social revolution pits one fully self-conscious class against another as holding "a ridiculously pedantic view" (356).

²Both intellectually and politically, I find the idea that capitalism and bourgeois rule were not fully functional in Spain before the 1960s, in the economic realm, and the late 1970s, in the political realm, to be absurd. Capitalism in nineteenth-century Spain could not measure up to the British or French capitalism of its day, and in fact Spanish national capital was often subordinated to foreign capital, but Spain's nineteenth-century economy was a capitalist economy nonetheless after 1836-1843. Indeed, all areas of economic activity were subject to the laws of the marketplace. Among the political consequences of claiming that bourgeois rule is not consolidated in Spain until the 1960s and 70s is the inability to view Francoist Spain as a capitalist state. The degree of monopolization and corruption may have meant that Franco's economy constituted a version what today is called "crony capitalism," but it remained crony *capitalism*. Maintaining that capitalism and bourgeois politics do not arrive in Spain until the second half of the twentieth century also distorts the reality of Spanish fascism in relation to Spanish capitalism during the 1930s and 40s. Furthermore, while *caciquismo* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the illegality of political parties during Franco's dictatorship, did mean that Spain did not enjoy as full a range of democratic rights and freedoms as other capitalist countries, it is only an ideological illusion to believe that political pluralism must prevail before a nation can be considered to be fully capitalist and ruled by a bourgeoisie. Would anyone seriously claim that Pinochet's Chile or Suharto's Indonesia were not capitalist states? Did not the military in these countries rule in the interest of a national bourgeoisie with strong ties to international capital? And was not the economic power of national and international capital at all times the final arbiter over the Chilean and Indonesian militaries?

³Here, though, I would also not want to minimize the social and cultural ferment that mark periods of political revolution. To pursue this aspect of the question is best done in a separate study.

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