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0521416248 - The Castilian Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: New Perspectives on the Economic and Social History of Seventeenth-Century Spain - Edited by I. A. A. Thompson and Bartolome Yun Casalilla

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Introduction

The seventeenth century has long been established as a key moment in the economic development of modern Europe, a period of crisis, which was decisive for the transformation of the European economy and its differentiation into Atlantic, Mediterranean and Eastern models, for the transition from 'feudal' to 'capitalist' economic formations, and for the subsequent genesis of the industrial revolution.¹ Yet, in the now extensive economic historiography of this crucial period, the marginalisation of Spain is one of the most striking and most deplorable failings. It is enough to examine the bibliographical references of scholars, such as Hobsbawm, North and Thomas, Wallerstein, Brenner, De Vries, or Kriedte, among others, for whom the seventeenth century is central to their depiction of Europe's long-term economic development, to recognise how unsatisfactory is their treatment of metropolitan Spain.²

Yet Spain's role in early-modern Europe was pivotal. The economy of Castile, which was four parts or more of Spain in terms of manpower and wealth, was in many ways the hub of the entire economy of Europe. Not only did it sustain, as long as it was able,

¹ See the now classic exposition of these themes by E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The overall crisis of the European economy in the seventeenth century', *Past and Present* 5 & 6 (1954).

² D. C. North and R. P. Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World* (Cambridge, 1973); I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1974-80); J. de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600-1750* (Cambridge, 1976); P. Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists. Europe and the World Economy 1500-1800* (Leamington Spa, 1983), original German edition, Göttingen 1980; T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985).

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the military and political hegemony of the Spanish monarchy, which was itself the *raison d'être* of so much of Europe's international finance and exchange, it was also the link between the North and the Mediterranean and between Europe and America, a key market for grain, naval stores, copper, woollens, silks and linen, an important supplier of raw wool and the main source of Europe's precious metals. The performance of the Castilian economy was thus a crucial factor in the performance of all the other major European economies. For the first three-quarters or more of the sixteenth century Castile's population multiplied, the arable was extended, agricultural production increased, the level of urbanisation rose, the manufacture of silks and woollens flourished in the great textile centres of Toledo, Granada, Segovia and Cordoba; wool exports remained buoyant until the 1560s, foreign trade until the 1590s, and traffic with the Indies until the 1610s. In the last quarter of the sixteenth century this expansion first petered out and then fell back on itself. The progressive downturn of the Castilian economy was arguably one of the triggers of the general crisis of the European economy in the seventeenth century, the mark of the shift of economic preponderance from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, and the archetypical model of the 'failed' economy.

The experience of Spain is thus one of the keys to an understanding of the dynamics of the early-modern European economy. Yet the economic history of Spain is perhaps the worst known of all the major economies of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe among early-modern historians. This ignorance is undoubtedly related to the paucity of information that has been available until quite recently, as well as to the limited accessibility of original Spanish work to non-Spanish historians. In 1958, in a review of the recent historiography of early-modern Spain, the authors, Jaime Vicens Vives, Joan Reglà and Jordi Nadal, drew attention to the enormous gaps in our knowledge of Spanish economic history.³ Like J. H. Elliott in his celebrated article on the decline of Spain three years later,⁴ they pointed to the excessive concentration of historians on external influences on the Spanish economy and the

³ J. Vicens Vives, J. Reglà, J. Nadal, 'L'Espagne aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles', *Revue Historique* ccxx (1958).

⁴ J. H. Elliott, 'The Decline of Spain', *Past and Present* 20 (1961).

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relative neglect of internal factors. Agrarian conditions, land holding, methods and techniques of cultivation, crops, yields and returns, regional differences, population structure and change, the organisation of manufacturing activity, of the trades and crafts, investment, markets, the structure of demand were all key areas of the economy about which solid knowledge was almost totally lacking; there was no adequate modern study of any industry, nor a substantial piece of recent research on any local or urban economy. That lack they attributed in large part to the domination of Spanish economic history by foreign scholarship with its own concerns and preoccupations, which both skewed work in the direction of commerce, foreign trade, monetary flows and the international credit system, and filtered the explanation of the 'decline of Spain' through national and religious prejudices and the interlocking prisms of Protestant individualism, political liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and the teleological perspectives of industrialisation and modernisation. Thus the failure of the Spanish economy has in a long tradition that extends from the seventeenth century to the second half of the twentieth been explained in terms of arbitrary government, a bad religion, the tyrannical Inquisition, reactionary *hidalgo* values, the wretched laziness of the people, the absence of a capitalist and entrepreneurial spirit and other failings of the national character, as much as in terms of objective economic analysis.⁵

Although it would be wrong to suggest either that all those gaps have been plugged, or that none of the orthodoxies of the early sixties has survived, a great deal has changed since then. Alongside the continuing contributions of foreign scholars, there has been a veritable explosion of historical scholarship in Spain since the 1970s. Not only has the factual information available to us been multiplied enormously, but by their openness to the methodological and interdisciplinary influences of recent French and Anglo-American historiography and by seeking out new sources in tithe, fiscal, parish and municipal records and subjecting them to new methods of quantitative and comparative analysis, the new generation of Spanish historians has both invalidated many of the

⁵ For an early and trenchant expression of many of these prejudices see Francis Willughby, 'A relation of a voyage made through a great part of Spain' (1664) in J. Ray, *Travels through the Low Countries* (London, 1738), I, pp. 339–428; Pedro

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conclusions of their predecessors and pursued lines of investigation into the social relations of power and the economy hitherto unexplored.

As Angel García Sanz points out in chapter 1 in this volume, economic history now has a much wider and more solid evidential basis. In 1958 historians were still very much reliant on normative, descriptive and anecdotal sources – legislation, the debates and petitions of the Cortes, the frequently propagandist treatises of the *arbitristas*, the accounts of travellers, often lacking in chronological and geographical perspective. Hamilton's price data published in 1934 was the only major continuous quantitative series available on which solid argument could be established.⁶ The completion in 1959 of the massive study of H. and P. Chaunu,⁷ with its painstaking, if not always uncontentious, evaluations of the tonnages of shipping engaged in the American trade between 1504 and 1650, gave a new statistical basis to the curve of the fortunes of the Spanish economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but at the same time reinforced that over-concentration on external influences that Elliott wanted redressed. During the 1960s, however, as the influence of the materialism of the *Annales* school and its methodologies penetrated into Spain – mediated through Catalan history and historians as a covert expression of a more diffuse, soft Marxist, intellectual opposition to the cultural and spiritual underpinnings of the Franco regime – demographers and economic historians began to exploit parish registers, tithe returns and the immense wealth of the records of the royal fisc in Simancas in an entirely new and systematic way. Then, from the mid-1970s, the regional sentiment and the political and academic decentralisation of the 'España de las autonomías', released with the ending of Franco's Spain, had a profound effect on the orientation and the local funding of historical studies. There is now hardly a major provincial capital that has not commissioned its own multi-volumed history, organised its own historical conferences, published its own local journal, and reprinted its classic histories. The regions have established their own universities and the historical research they conduct is overwhelm-

Sainz Rodríguez, *Evolución de las ideas sobre la decadencia española* (Madrid, 1962), is still the fullest general survey of the subject.

⁶ E. J. Hamilton, *American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501–1650* (Cambridge, MA, 1934).

⁷ H. and P. Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650)*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1959).

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ingly focused on the region. The result has been a huge acceleration of output, remarkable in both quantity and quality, represented by a series of local demographic studies, urban histories, and regional monographs in the elaboration of which Spanish scholars have been in the forefront. As yet, however, hardly any of this impressive and wide-ranging research has been absorbed into the wider non-specialist scholarship outside Spain, or into general surveys of the European economy. The ignorance of this work outside Spain is not only an injustice, it also diminishes the value of any analysis of European economic development that fails to take account of it.

It is the purpose of the present collection to make available to an English-speaking readership some of the most important of the radically new perspectives on seventeenth-century Castilian economic and social history that have been opened up in the last twenty years or so by this new generation of Spanish historians that has flourished since the end of the Franco regime. The seventeenth-century crisis, so long abandoned to polemicists of 'decline', has been 'rediscovered' as the crucible of modern Spain and, perhaps even more important, of modern Castile. It is one of the areas in which Spanish historians have been able to break ground untilled or left fallow by their predecessors, and to reinsert Spain into the mainstream of European historiography, which in political, as well as in historical terms, means both to accept Europe into Spain and to restore Spain to Europe.

In view of the important political, social and structural differences between the Castilian core and the Galician, Cantabrian, Basque and Aragonese peripheries, it has seemed sensible to retain some measure of coherence by limiting the selection of material to the Crown of Castile and to economic and social aspects of the crisis in Castile. The essays have been chosen in order to provide a broad overall coverage of the main themes of Castilian economic and social history, population, agriculture, pastoralism, the Indies trade, manufacturing, urban decline and seigniorial reaction, as well as a discussion of some of the key concepts around which the debate on the nature of the Castilian crisis is being structured, concepts such as dependence, peripheralisation, deurbanisation, oligarchisation, refeudalisation, which, as the different points of view expressed in these essays reveal, are themselves subjects of contention among Spanish historians.

In chapter 1, García Sanz presents a succinct overview of the

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advances in knowledge and the major changes in interpretation of the seventeenth-century crisis and Castilian 'decadence' that have taken place since the 1960s. These revisions amount to a breaking-up of the monolithic 'seventeenth-century depression' into two distinct regional patterns, interior and coastal, with different chronologies and intensities. Indeed, in some regions the seventeenth century was actually positive and can be regarded as the starting point of the growing gap in modern Spain between centre and periphery which reversed the economic balance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and persisted into the twentieth century. García Sanz also draws attention to the way the new revisionism is presenting a less passive view of the Castilian past, a recognition that the seventeenth century evinced an ability to react to depression, and to readjust, shifting cereal production from bread grains to fodder to promote livestock, moving to the manufacture of lower quality textiles, and responding to lower rents by increased land concentration and the strengthening of seigniorial rights.

The perspectives of current Spanish historiography are thus significantly different from those which informed Vicens Vives's influential *Economic History of Spain*, a work which when it was first published in 1955 was a synthesis of the state of the art at the time.⁸ Vicens Vives saw plague as decisive in the evolution of population; the expulsion of the *moriscos* and the privileges of the Mesta as crucial in the collapse of agriculture; wage-price differentials as central to an explanation of industrial failure. He gave a major role to economic policy, to the burden of taxation, currency manipulations, price fixing, monopolies, government and guild regulations, as well as to the administrative structure of the state. He also put considerable emphasis on traditional explanations of Spanish economic failure, theological prejudices against commerce, indiscriminate charity, the *hidalgo* mentality, the lack of a capitalist spirit, rentism, parasitism, the 'puerile pride in indolence'. Little of this survives, and where it does it is formulated in very different terms from those employed by Vicens. Plague, as Pérez Moreda shows in an innovatory work which deploys a wide range of historical demographic techniques to challenge the resident orthodoxy (chapter 2), cannot be demonstrated to have had a decisive role in

⁸ J. Vicens Vives, *Historia económica de España* (Barcelona, 1955); English translation, *An Economic History of Spain* (Princeton, NJ, 1969).

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the history of population in the seventeenth century; the expulsion of the *moriscos*, whatever its consequences for Valencia and Aragon, was of marginal, or at best of local importance in the Crown of Castile; the Mesta was really no more than a bit-player on the agricultural scene compared with the changes in land use and control that were operating at the local level. There is a new sophistication of agrarian analysis, a greater attention to 'the social relations of production', the proletarianisation of the small-holder, the extension of rent, the privatisation of the commons. There is a different approach to the burden of the fisc, which is understood not simply as extraction, but as a system of redistribution of the social product through the oligarchisation of taxation and credit. The Europeanisation of the seventeenth-century Castilian crisis has also had the effect of shifting the focus of interest from explanations of the 'crisis' itself, which was a phenomenon common to Europe, to explanations of the failure to recover from the crisis, which was not, but which was decisive for Spain's divergence from the western European path. That has meant an increased concern with responses to the crisis, which is now seen much more as a series of readjustments, or shifts between public and private, centre and locality, town and country, arable and pasture, peasant and lord, consumer and producer, manufacture and commerce.

The concept of 'readjustment' was first applied to the agrarian crisis of seventeenth-century Castile by Gonzalo Anes in the path-breaking article, originally published in 1978, which is printed here as chapter 3. His analysis of tithe returns, relative price movements and baptismal records questioned the previously unchallenged reality of a general agrarian depression in the seventeenth century. What he saw was a quasi-Malthusian crisis in the sixteenth century, which disrupted the equilibrium between arable, pasture and woodland, resolved by the establishment of a new balance leading to increased productivity and therefore greater *per capita* income, together with a shift in output from wheat and barley to rye, wine, oil, wool and meat. 'The depression of the seventeenth century consisted (in Castile, Extremadura and Andalusia) of a series of readjustments and adaptations . . . to harmonise food production with population.' The stimulus Anes gave to looking anew at the Castilian agrarian economy is evidenced in the response of Llopis Agelán in chapter 4. Llopis's arguments for an absolute

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deterioration of *per capita* agricultural incomes lead not to a return to a static view of the agrarian economy but, in seeking to reconcile his conclusions with those of Anes, to a different emphasis on change. The agrarian balance was not simply a neo-Malthusian relationship between population and resources, but a more complex relationship between arable and pasture in which the vicissitudes of population and urban demand played their part but within a framework of political and social domination which had as much to do with the determination of land use and the distribution of the surplus product of agriculture as straightforward market forces. The increased supply of land in the seventeenth century went hand in hand with a process of privatisation and enclosure which transferred the usufruct of the commons from the peasant to the local bosses. What was critical about the seventeenth century, Llopis argues, was the rise of the 'poderosos' and the appearance of a distinct, truly landless, rural class.

The concept of 'dependence', applied to the Castilian economy by Henry Kamen in his challenge to the very notion of a 'decline of Spain',⁹ is another key issue which has informed the current debate about the nature of the Spanish economy. It is addressed directly (though not always explicitly) in these essays. In chapter 5, Bilbao and Fernández de Pinedo argue, though without actually using Wallerstein's terms, that the 'dependence' of the economy of the Castilian 'semi-periphery' on the requirements of the 'core' economies of France, England and the Low Countries, was a crucial determinant of land use and hence of agrarian prosperity. The combination of the vicissitudes in European demand for Spanish wool with the control of the land by sheep and pasture owners first rendered the relative abundance of pasture in the seventeenth century nugatory and then deprived the farmer of the full benefits of the expanding demand for arable products after 1670. However, whether the fate of the Castilian economy can be satisfactorily explained by this concept of 'dependence' is questioned in chapter 6 by García-Baquero's examination of the links between the Indies trade and the Andalusian economy. His conclusions, though cautious and tentative, not only underline the lack of uniformity in the behaviour of the various sectors of the Andalusian economy in the seventeenth century and the important chronological disphase

⁹ H. Kamen, 'The Decline of Spain: an historical myth?', *Past and Present* 81 (1978).

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between north and south, where the crisis was limited to the second half of the century, but they bring us back to re-emphasising internal causes of both the expansion of the regional economy in the sixteenth century and its crisis in the seventeenth.

The process of ruralisation, which was the common experience of most European economies in the seventeenth century, also characterised the economy of Castile. The breakdown of the extended networks of the sixteenth century and of the historic symbiosis of town and country, and the regression to forms of local economic autarky are major themes in the essays of Gelabert, Marcos Martín and Fortea. Ruiz Martín, in a short but seminal essay on the civic debt of the city of Valladolid, identifies the transfer to the municipalities of responsibility for underwriting the public debt as one of the crucial elements in that process. Gelabert, developing this theme in the broader perspective of urban decline in Castile, focuses on the shift of the fiscal burden to the towns and on the disadvantaged state of the royal municipalities, as compared with those in seigniorial jurisdictions and in the privileged, non-Castilian kingdoms, as the key to the long-term deurbanisation of Castile. Bernardo Ares's close analysis of one particular transaction between Crown and city, however, raises the possibility that it was the cities rather than their rural districts which were the beneficiaries of such fiscal bargains with the Crown. The urban/rural, sectoral and regional incidence of taxation is something about which we are still too ignorant for sound conclusions, but the ruralisation of population and the economy throughout the interior between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries is undoubted. It is an aspect of the crisis of fundamental long-term importance for the shaping of modern Castile, the explanation of which calls for bold general hypotheses, such as that of Gelabert, or Ringrose's thesis concerning the distorting effect of Madrid on the Spanish economy,¹⁰ as well as for specific illustrations of the process, such as that provided by Marcos Martín in his subtle analysis of the long-term transformation of the famous fairs-city of Medina del Campo from an international commercial centre to a small, provincial market town.

From the perspective of the history of industrialisation, the

¹⁰ David R. Ringrose, *Madrid and the Spanish Economy, 1560–1850* (University of California Press, 1983).

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collapse of commerce and manufacturing in the seventeenth century has always been regarded as the central feature of Spain's economic 'failure'. Until current work in progress on the textile industries of Toledo and Segovia is completed, Fortea's original and detailed examination of the decline of textile manufacturing in Cordoba and, even more important, of its failure to recover, is almost unique as a contribution to the problem of the long-term de-industrialisation of the Castilian economy. In the conclusion of his illuminating survey of the various unsuccessful projects for the regeneration of Cordoba's manufactures, Fortea hints at social-structural rigidities and cultural conservatism as the underlying inhibitors of modernisation and successful economic adaptation in Castile. The same theme is central to Marcos Martin's account of the provincialisation of Medina del Campo. The reinforcement of the traditional social structure, with its implications for the distribution of the social product, the composition of the market, the employment of capital and the control of the means of agricultural production, has come to be seen as one of the determining responses to the crisis in Castile. The most characteristic form of that reinforcement was what is often described as 'aristocratic reaction', or as 'refeudalisation'.

Whether the reaction of the aristocracy to the economic crisis of seigniorialism in the seventeenth century is properly to be understood as a form of 'refeudalisation', a privatisation of public functions and a real increase in the effective power of the nobility, and, therefore, how the economic crisis affected the distribution of power within the state, is the issue which divides Atienza and Yun in the final section of the volume. For Atienza, 'we can speak bluntly of "refeudalisation"'. For Yun, what has the appearance of 'refeudalisation' takes place within the framework of the state, is effected through the authority of the Crown not through the power of the lord, and implies neither a fragmentation of the political system nor a diminution of royal power. For both, however, the crisis of the seventeenth century reinforced the bonds between state and aristocracy and thus strengthened the grip of the extracting classes on the economy and on the distribution of the national wealth. All these themes are developed by Bartolomé Yun in his concluding observations and brought together in an overview which places Castile within the broader framework of the debate about the General European Crisis of the Seventeenth Century.