
Spain, Europe and the Atlantic world

Essays in honour of John H. Elliott

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Introduction: the centre and the periphery

RICHARD L. KAGAN AND GEOFFREY PARKER

The history of Spain in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was to consist of a continuing, and fruitful, dialogue between periphery and centre.¹

The idea of a dialogue – sometimes harmonious, sometimes divisive – between the centre and periphery of the early modern European state stands at the heart of much of John Elliott's historical writing. It is the fulcrum around which his *Imperial Spain* revolves, and it lies at the core of his analysis of the causes of the revolt of the Catalans in 1640 against the centralizing policies of the Madrid government, directed by the charismatic but insensitive count-duke of Olivares. Elliott subsequently extended the concept of centre versus periphery beyond Spanish shores, notably in 'Revolution and continuity in early modern Europe', his inaugural lecture as Professor of History at King's College London, in 1968, which perceived the various revolts of mid-seventeenth-century Europe as essentially conflicts between the loyalties owed to one's *patria* – representing a province or a principality more often than a nation – and those owed to one's monarch.² In his writings on the Americas, too, the relationship between centre and periphery plays a vital role. Elliott's Wiles Lectures of 1969 on *The Old World and the New, 1492–1650*, the classic statement on the intellectual

¹ John H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain, 1469–1716* (London, 1963), p. 32.

² Originally published in *Past and Present* (1969), and reprinted in John H. Elliott, *Spain and its world 1500–1700: selected essays* (New Haven and London, 1989), pp. 92–113, see especially pp. 104–11.

interchange set in motion by Columbus' voyage, cited the perceptive memorandum of the humanist Hernán Pérez de Oliva to the city of Cordoba in 1524, drawing attention to the way in which the discovery and exploitation of America had affected the relative position of Spain, 'because formerly we were at the end of the world, and now we are in the middle of it, with an unprecedented change in our fortunes'.³

Finally, in the balance between centre and periphery Elliott found the secret of the survival of Spain as a great power long after its economic and demographic base had been eroded. Charles II, the last of the Spanish Habsburgs, undoubtedly ruled a smaller empire than his great-grandfather Philip II, and the decisions that affected its future were taken in Paris, London and Turin rather than in Madrid: 'Nobody', Elliott has written, 'would dispute that the seventeenth century saw a *relative* decline of Spanish power, when compared with its principal European rivals.' But the paradox of survival amid this decline may be explained by two distinct developments. On the one hand, the experience of Castile (the heart of the empire) differed from that of the rest. 'Other parts of the Iberian peninsula, especially along the periphery, either suffered less than Castile from the seventeenth-century recession, or even made modest gains, so that, over the course of the century, there was some shift in the internal balance of economic forces, to Castile's detriment.' 'It would seem that we are faced with a diminution of Castile's capacity to bear the cost of empire, and consequently with the problem, in the first instance, not so much of the decline of Spain as of the *decline of Castile*.' On the other hand, the Iberian experience proved far from unique: many other societies in Western Europe experienced severe economic and social problems in the mid-seventeenth century: 'Seventeenth-century Spain needs, therefore, to be set firmly back into the context of contemporary conditions, and particularly conditions in the Mediterranean world.'⁴

Instead of dismissing Spain's decline as either the inevitable result of some deeply rooted flaw in the Spanish character, the consequence of the personal shortcomings of its rulers, or the inexorable outcome of 'strategic overstretch', Elliott viewed it as a process that might have been reversed with the right combination of economic, political and social reforms. Instead of irreversible decline, then, the key questions became how could the great empire best be managed and how could its power and reputation best be maintained. That is how the count-duke of Olivares, the statesman to whom he has devoted so many years of research, conceived the problem;

³ John H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 73.

⁴ Elliott, *Spain and its world*, pp. 215, 222 and 221.

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and that is how Elliott succeeded in offering a new and original way of understanding the history of seventeenth-century Spain as a great power.

Like Olivares, moreover, Elliott recognized that political power in the seventeenth century did not simply come out of a gun. It was also a function of image and of *reputación*. From the 1590s to the 1650s, Spain's leaders consistently refused to adjust their foreign policy in line with the declining resources available to sustain it.

Throughout these years, the principal objectives of Spain's [foreign] policy remained unchanged: the maintenance of the catholic cause, the defence of the dynastic interests of the two branches of the House of Austria, the retention of the loyal provinces of the southern Netherlands, and the exclusion of foreigners from Spain's empire of the Indies.

Admittedly, these aims sound modest; but, as Elliott noted, 'a defensive mentality . . . does not necessarily imply a defensive posture. Attack may, after all, be the best form of defence.' During the reign of Philip IV, many of Spain's political leaders came to believe that the monarchy could only be maintained by taking an assertive stance whenever Spanish interests were perceived to be at risk, if only to preserve 'reputation'. However 'an excessive commitment to upholding "reputation" precludes a flexible response to changing situations, and casts its exponents, at least in their own eyes, as men in a heroic mould, battling gallantly against the oncoming tide'. Thus, in a letter of 1625 to a veteran diplomat who had suggested that the ship of state was about to founder, Olivares replied with characteristic hyperbole that 'as the minister with paramount obligations it is for me to die unprotesting, chained to my oar, until not a fragment is left in my hands'. Eight years later, when Spain's domestic and international situation had deteriorated even further, the count-duke asserted that the best policy in adversity was to "die doing something". It was a not inappropriate response for a great power whose days of greatness were numbered.'⁵

The tension between centre and periphery, the nature of patriotism and community, the costs of empire, the need to conserve – and to justify – the assets conferred on Castile by providence: these form the interlocking themes of John Elliott's work on Spain and its world during the early modern period, and they have been taken up in this collection of essays by his students and disciples. Each derives, in some way, from an idea or assertion in Elliott's work, and each has benefited from his perceptions and path-breaking research.

⁵ Quotations taken from 'Foreign policy and domestic crisis: Spain 1598–1659' in *Spain and its world*, pp. 114–36, at pp. 134, 115 and 135–6.

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Part I, 'Power and propaganda: the world of the court', centres on the organization and projection of government authority. In 'Twin souls', Antonio Feros focuses on the 'language of friendship' in the early seventeenth century in an effort to explain the political power acquired by Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, duke of Lerma and favourite of Philip III between 1598 and 1618. Where Elliott studied Philip IV's favourite, the count-duke of Olivares, Feros focuses on Lerma's political career, endeavouring to understand how Lerma and his followers justified the unusual degree of trust and confidence the monarch bestowed upon him, and how he transformed this trust into political power. Lerma's key position was that of *sumiller de corps* (groom of the stole), who accompanied the king on all occasions – at public audiences and ceremonies, when visiting the queen's chambers and when retiring to his privy chamber. Indeed, palace etiquette required that the king 'should never withdraw from the sight' of the *sumiller*, whom some saw as the king's 'companion and friend, whom [he] will ask for advice on all matters' (see pages 37–8 below). Feros offers a better understanding not only of Lerma – a historical figure whom most historians, Elliott included, have simply dismissed as a corrupt opportunist – but also of the 'peculiar institution' of the favourite, which flourished at the courts of many early modern monarchs.

Power, in the sense of fiscal power – the ability to tax – is central to the essay of Charles Jago. What limits, if any, restrained the Habsburg monarchs' power to tax their subjects? What arguments were utilized to justify their right to exact tribute, and what arguments were deployed in opposition? Jago demonstrates that these issues received serious and sustained consideration between the 1590s and the 1630s. In the sixteenth century they had been central to the School of Salamanca, a group of canon lawyers, philosophers and theologians whose writings examined numerous aspects of what would later become known as 'political economy'; in the seventeenth century, as the burden of taxation inexorably rose, they became a subject for national debate. Countless pamphlets and treatises addressed the morality of the Habsburgs' efforts to extract more and more money from their subjects, while theologians all over Spain were asked to assess the legality of each major request for more taxes. In this context, 'the periphery' becomes the harassed taxpayer and 'the centre' a monarchy whose demands proved almost insatiable.

In the final essay of this section, Richard L. Kagan addresses yet another facet of royal power: the right to control knowledge of the past, the power to write history itself. History for Habsburg Spain becomes a struggle between accounts written at the royal court by a sequence of royal chroniclers as

opposed to those elaborated in the provinces as well as in specific cities and towns. To whom did Spain's history belong? What was to be included in the record of Spain's past and what left out? Was history simply a list of princely *gestae*, and thus an instrument of royal propaganda; or should it focus on the achievements of individual town and cities, many of which commissioned histories written from a distinctive local perspective designed as a corrective to the work of scholars in the monarchy's employ? The lively debate on this issue sparked new interest in historical writing and served as the catalyst for Spanish chorography, one of the most vibrant (if misunderstood) historical genres of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Because Elliott conceived the tensions between centre and periphery primarily in political terms, he was sensitive to the fact that the Habsburg monarchy was a 'composite state', an amalgam of separate polities – each with its own laws, institutions and traditions – that owed allegiance to a single ruler. Within this amalgam, obvious differences abounded. Catalonia spoke Catalan, Castile spoke Castilian and so on; but language was not the only division among the Habsburgs' Iberian subjects. Customs barriers, distinctive economies, profound differences in topography and temperament, and racial and religious divisions – notably the centuries-old cleavage between Christian and Muslim, Jew and Gentile, New Christian and Old – also inhibited the development of a strong, centralized state. Competing but vigorous notions of local and regional identity based upon these differences complicated matters yet further so that the underlying patterns of Spanish society, as the essays in Part II of this volume ('The pattern of society: community and identity in Habsburg Spain') make clear, militated against the emergence of a unitary state.

The incorporation of a sizeable population of converted Jews (*conversos*) and their descendants into a profoundly catholic society constituted a central episode in the evolution of early modern Spanish society. The *conversos* of Castile by and large dwelt in the cities, and the challenges they posed to the Old Christian majority represents an important, albeit conflictive chapter in the history of many Spanish towns. Linda Martz explores this particular cleavage in her study of the place of Toledo's *converso* merchants in the kingdom of Granada, which fell under Castilian dominion in 1492. Here the question of centre versus periphery is examined from a novel perspective because Toledo, in the heart of Castile, represents the centre, with Granada, only recently conquered, a periphery brimming with opportunities for land, office and riches (notably the profits derived from the cultivation and manufacture of silk). Toledo's *converso* merchants proved quick to take advantage of these opportunities, and many migrated

to Granada soon after its conquest and annexation to the crown of Castile. In doing so they became wealthy but, as they soon discovered, riches brought their own embarrassments, and provoked not only resentment among Toledo's Old Christians but also local statutes which progressively excluded the *conversos* from the exercise of municipal and religious office. Granada in this sense helped to marginalize Toledo's *conversos* at the very moment when this 'periphery' was itself in the process of becoming integrated into Castile.

But what was Castile? And how did the centre of the empire view itself? This is the question addressed by I. A. A. Thompson, harking back to Elliott's essay 'Revolt and continuity in early modern Europe', which recognized the vital role played by the concept of *patria* in early modern revolts. *Patria* defies easy definition, but it can be linked to the concept of homeland, *Heimat* or *patrie*, with the attendant meanings of identity, loyalty and self-definition. Kagan's discussion of Spanish chorography addressed the issue of local identity, which proved central to the manner in which early modern Spaniards situated themselves in the world. But how, and to what degree, did the concept of *patria* function on a wider scale? In other words, to what extent – and under what circumstances – did Castilians view themselves as Castilians, Catalans as Catalans and Valencians as Valencians? Thompson's essay goes a long way in providing an answer to this set of questions for the kingdom of Castile, the centre of the Spanish monarchy but one which nevertheless felt itself alienated and apart from the monarchy for most of the early modern era. He argues that whereas at the beginning of this period Castilians understood themselves as constituting a 'natural' community as distinct from, and often in opposition to, other such communities (Catalan, Portuguese, French), by the eighteenth century they conceived of themselves principally as Spaniards – that is, as members of the 'political community' that Spain's new Bourbon monarchy in the eighteenth century endeavoured to construct.

Xavier Gil deals with many of these same issues, but from the perspective of the crown of Aragon. Focusing on sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Aragonese constitutionalism, he offers a detailed analysis of the various meanings of the term 'liberty' as elaborated by a series of Aragonese jurists and political theorists. The word 'liberty' could be heard in the streets of Saragossa during the uprising of 1590–1, for it provided a rallying cry for those Aragonese opposed to the Inquisition and to the policies of Philip II and in essence embodied the laws and privileges which distinguished the government of Aragon from that of Castile. At issue here was the Aragonese *patria*, which was conceived largely in legal-jurisdictional

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terms and defined in opposition to the laws and policies elaborated by the monarch in Madrid.

James Casey reaches similar conclusions regarding the meaning of *patria* from the perspective of Valencia, whose history was the focus of his study *The kingdom of Valencia in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1979). There, Casey's concerns were primarily demographic and economic; in this essay, he turns to the subject of Valencian patriotism as manifested in the writing of local history, various commemorative celebrations, and the defence of the Valencian *furs* (customs) – the legal embodiment of the Valencian *patria*. Valencian identity stood apart from loyalty to the king; but, unlike Catalonia, which rose in revolt against the monarchy in defence of its own sense of *patria*, Valencia remained quiescent, largely because its élite was far better integrated into the world of the court than its Catalan equivalent.

The question of Catalan identity – a central concern of Elliott's *Revolt of the Catalans* – is the subject of James Amelang's essay on the journal kept between 1600 and 1630 by the Catalan lawyer and chronicler, Jeroni Pujades. Elliott himself discovered the missing sections of this important diary while conducting research in Barcelona in 1956 ('"Sensacional, Elliott, sensacional", cried Vicens [Vives] when I told him of my find.')

⁶ Amelang uses this document, still rated the most important first-person source for the history of Catalonia in the decades leading up to the revolt, less as an autobiographical document than as a tool for understanding what it meant to be Catalan. Pujades, who also wrote an important history of the principality, emerges as a Catalan patriot. But he was not the only Catalan to keep a diary or to write an autobiography: almost eighty 'first-person documents' from Catalonia have so far been discovered for the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Indeed, the relatively democratic régime of the principality encouraged citizen participation in government, so that autobiographical writing became a public as well as a private act, an expression of citizenship itself. The anti-castilianism expressed in Pujades' diary therefore offers an interesting insight into the views of the centre held on the periphery, and a way of understanding the cultural forces that frustrated Olivares' attempts to erode the barriers that existed between the states of the peninsula.

Identity, both local and national, also figures in the essay by Peter Sahlins, which examines how the national frontier separating France and

⁶ *Solemne investidura de Doctor Honoris Causa al Profesor Sir John Elliott* (Barcelona, 1994), p. 28.

Spain came to be delineated in the Cerdagne, a valley high in the Pyrenees. In his view, the emergence of this boundary had less to do with politicians at the centre, in Paris and Madrid, than with peasants and village communities on the periphery, in the Cerdagne itself. Although central governments might negotiate the boundaries at international conferences, it was 'the dialectical interplay of centre and periphery in the borderland [that] structured the emergence of distinct state territories and national identities of France and Spain between 1659 and 1868' (pages 228–9 below). National identities, Sahlins argues, were not imposed from 'above' or the 'centre' but developed out of local disputes in a local context in which opposing groups (both French and Catalan speakers) only occasionally appealed for help from their respective 'nation-states'. The formation of national identity was thus essentially local: it did not emerge – as some have argued – at the expense of local identity, but rather complemented, and in some cases actually reinforced it.

The dialogue between centre and periphery, albeit in a somewhat different sense, arises in the third part of this volume: 'Spain and its empire'. Following Philip II's annexation of Portugal in 1580, Spain became a truly global monarchy, with responsibilities that ranged through Mexico, Peru, Brazil and the Philippines, to Macao, Malacca and Goa and back through Mozambique, and Angola to the European heartland. As the English traveller James Howell observed in 1623, King Philip IV 'hath dominions in all parts of the world . . . so the sun shines in all the four-and-twenty hours of the natural day upon some part or other of his countries'.⁷ But an empire of such unprecedented size brought numerous problems in its wake: how to conceptualize it, how to organize and harness its energies, and how to defend it against other Europeans.

The first two essays in this section examine issues of imperial defence at two crucial junctures. Geoffrey Parker examines the 1580s, and questions whether the acquisition of the Portuguese empire strengthened or weakened Spain. Initially, it is true, it made Philip II seem to many a new David, a warrior-king chosen by God to reunite His people and subdue His enemies. But the spectre of Iberian domination alarmed other European powers. The scale and riches of the combined Spanish–Portuguese empire also served as an invitation to those who simply wished to live off the crumbs Philip II left behind. But what began as piracy and privateering quickly evolved into full-scale armed attack, as it was discovered that the Spanish empire could

⁷ J. Jacobs, ed., *Epistolae Ho-eliae: the familiar letters of James Howell* (2 vols., London, 1890), I, p. 198, letter to Lord Colchester from Madrid, 1 February 1623.

only respond to such challenges slowly, and with disproportionate expenditures of both men and money. The costs of defending this new worldwide empire, Parker argues, proved to be Spain's Achilles' heel and led ultimately to the ruin of that part of the empire that paid most of the bills: the kingdom of Castile.

By the 1630s, the difficulties of defence had become acute. Jonathan Israel's essay, 'Olivares, the Cardinal-Infante and Spain's strategy in the Low Countries (1635–1643): the road to Rocroi', demonstrates that the central government had resolved to turn the Low Countries, a thousand miles to the north and far removed from the Mediterranean–Madrid–Seville–Indies axis, into its principal military theatre, or *plaza de armas*. Even after France declared war in 1635, Olivares and his ministers continued to concentrate their forces against the Dutch and (in a remarkable piece of detective work) Israel shows that the celebrated invasion of France in 1636, which penetrated as far as Corbie, was undertaken in contradiction of express orders from Madrid. The military commander in Brussels, Philip IV's brother the Cardinal-Infante, responded on his own initiative and at short notice to a request from the Holy Roman Emperor for a campaign in support of his own attack on France (pages 278–9 below). Only the outbreak of rebellion, first in Catalonia and then in Portugal, forced a major shift in strategy: after 1640, the principal task of the Spanish Army of Flanders was to pin down French forces in order to prevent them from sending support to the rebels in the Iberian peninsula. At first the new strategy worked well, with several striking successes; but it led to disaster in 1643 at the battle of Rocroi which, more than any other single event, undermined Spain's international position abroad and caused anguish at home. In the words of Don Luis de Haro, Olivares' successor as chief minister:

The defeat of Rocroi has been followed in all areas by the consequences we had always feared. It was a terrible outcome, and one for which most observers have failed to find any military or political cause. I must tell you that it is something that can only be recollected with great pain, because although the losses inflicted by God must be accepted, those which seem to stem from the hand of Man are always harder to bear.⁸

Nevertheless, in spite of rebellions and defeats in Europe, Spain retained control of its dominions in America almost intact. Peter Bakewell focuses on the way in which the Spanish *máquina* – as the empire was sometimes known – successfully harnessed the resources of the vast American territories that Cortés, Pizarro and other *conquistadores* had vanquished in the king's name.

⁸ Bibliothèque publique et universitaire, Geneva, Collection manuscrite Edouard Favre, 39/88-9, Haro to the marquis of Velada, 17 November 1643.

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These territories covered an area initially four times as large as the kingdom of Castile, and contained a population seven times as great. But how were they to be managed? Bakewell surveys the establishment of the mining operations, the technology and the trading networks created by the Spaniards to tap El Dorado's riches, along with the administrative, judicial and religious institutions designed to keep these new enterprises and those who managed them – both indigenous and European – under close scrutiny and control. But, as Spanish officials and churchmen soon learned, it was easier to control the bodies of the *indios* than their minds. Bakewell thus raises the important question of the limits of Spanish domination in regions far removed from the centre of the empire in Madrid: the 'conquest after the conquest' remained – and was doomed to remain – incomplete.

Many *conquistadores*, of course, regarded such matters as irrelevant. For them, empire was a simple matter of exploration, conquest and exploitation, or as the crude motto of one of them read: 'A la espada y el compás. Mas y mas y mas y mas' ('To the sword and the compass, more and more and more and more').⁹ Many Spanish lawyers and theologians thought differently, however, and recognized that all empires had their limits. Anthony Pagden considers these 'opponents of empire', who asked how it was possible to defend an empire which was already over-extended, and debated the ultimate aim of imperial conquest: more territory or more wealth? Initially, as he shows, the Habsburgs opted for land, but by the eighteenth century the Bourbons stood this policy on its end. Their new policy was to extract more from less, mainly in the form of commercial developments of mutual benefit to both colony and metropolis.

In the end, however, that too created its own set of problems, which form the subject of the last essay in the volume, by Jusep Fradera. The issue here is the integration of Spain's last colonies – Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines – into Spain itself. From the sixteenth century onwards, the colonies were, both juridically and politically, a world apart: a periphery in every sense of the word. The delegates gathered at the famous liberal Cortes of Cadiz in 1810, however, envisioned an empire in which the division between metropolis and colony would be erased. Their idea was to abandon the laws which made the Americas into colonies, replacing them with others that would create 'a single, united monarchy, a single, united nation, a single, united family' and guarantee all Spanish Americans, natives and creoles alike, the same rights and privileges as Spaniards themselves. Yet the legal equality promised by the Cortes proved elusive. As Fradera

⁹ Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, *Milicia y descripción de las Indias* (1599), frontispiece.

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demonstrates, Spanish officials in Havana resisted all legislative efforts to transform Cuba from colony to province, and in Madrid even intense lobbying by wealthy Cuban sugar merchants was unable to break the juridical status quo. Self-interest, of course, accounted for much of the resistance, but so too did engrained habits of mind. Colonies had helped to define Spain for centuries – they had literally made it into a centre – and the thought of relinquishing that status was too much even for Spain’s liberal governments to contemplate. At a time when world events were already making Spain into a periphery, the Spaniards proved reluctant to do anything to speed that process along.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Spain, after considerable soul-searching on the part of many intellectuals, surrendered to the forces that moved it to the periphery of world affairs. Yet, for over three hundred years, ‘the empire upon which the sun never set’ served as the fulcrum around which much of world history had turned. Fundamental questions about how and why this vast empire survived for so long still defy easy answer. The essays gathered in this volume provide some clues – among them, the unusual combination of a strong centre in the guise of a centralized royal bureaucracy with a periphery characterized by an entrenched yet flexible set of local and provincial identities and institutions. Although both centre and periphery always wanted more for themselves, over time a bargain was struck: each agreed to tolerate the other so long as they were accorded their slice of the imperial pie. As John Elliott put it:

The clue to this [the empire’s] surprising resilience is to be found in the structure of the monarchy. Loosely tied together by dynastic arrangements, it was not, as Olivares discovered to his cost, amenable to rapid and drastic change. Essentially it relied on its own inertia – on a system of equilibrium by which Madrid, the viceroys and the local aristocracies all enjoyed a share of power. So long as the equilibrium was not unduly disturbed, there was no great inducement in the provinces to make a bid for independence . . . [By and large] the local élites in the different parts of the monarchy found that they could do better for themselves within the framework of the monarchy than if they struck out on their own.¹⁰

Although, as Elliott himself pointed out, the same could be said of almost all early modern states, it proved a particular source of strength for the Spanish monarchy, which possessed a far larger ‘periphery’ than any other. In a system in which the strength of the periphery enhanced that of the centre, a quasi-federal empire on which the sun never set was, paradoxically, superbly equipped to survive.

¹⁰ John H. Elliott, ‘Monarchy and empire (1474–1700)’, in P. E. Russell, ed., *Spain: a companion to Spanish studies* (London, 1973), pp. 107–44, at p. 142.