SPEAKING of SPAIN

THE EVOLUTION OF RACE AND NATION IN THE HISPANIC WORLD

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Introduction

The year 1492 was a momentous one in Spain, a year that challenged the very notion of what was Spain and who was Spanish. The marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand in 1468 and the subsequent dynastic union of the crowns of Castile and Aragon—the two main states in Iberia—meant that, for the first time since antiquity, inhabitants of the Peninsula could think of themselves as part of one polity and subjects of one monarchy. Even as they conquered the last remaining Muslim state on Iberian soil (the Kingdom of Granada) and nurtured a fragile unity, the new monarchy turned outward to initiate the process of imperial expansion in Europe, Africa, America, and Asia. The coincidence of political unification and imperial expansion under the aegis of the Catholic Kings of Spain forced on the inhabitants of the peninsula, and the subjects of the Spanish monarchy generally; troubling and enduring questions about national and racial identity. This early confrontation with the world and its unknown others is also what makes Spain the key case for historical questions about race and nation in the making of the modern western world.

With Spain only ever provisionally unified and Catalonia threatening to regain its sovereignty, with constant debates about the meaning of Spain and Spanishness and about the presence in the country of “foreign” populations (Jews but especially Muslims and Latin Americans), it is evident that many of the questions Spaniards discussed in the past have resurfaced prominently in the early
The crisis of the Roman Empire also engulfed the Iberian Peninsula, as Gothic peoples from central Europe began to arrive in the early fifth century. The Gothic occupation was completed when one of the branches, the Visigoths, consolidated their power in the closing decades of the fifth century. At least in the symbolism that it later acquired, the period of Visigothic domination, which lasted until the early eighth century, was one of the most important in Iberian history. During this era the various peninsular territories were politically unified for the first time, and Christianity was proclaimed as the official religion, a move that has profoundly marked Spanish history until the present day. Modern historians have questioned the stability of the Gothic regime, and the strength of the Gothic influence on the native population of the peninsula, but nevertheless, the Visigothic period would be invoked from the Middle Ages onward as a sort of model, albeit a mythic one, of an Iberian Peninsula unified in politics and religion.

The Visigothic reign in Hispania ended the way it had begun, with the Visigoths this time on the receiving end of a new foreign invasion, originating in North Africa and representing the tidal wave of an expansionist Islam. The new invaders, known to Spaniards under the generic designation of Arabs or Moors, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and within a matter of months had overrun virtually the entire peninsula. Later generations of Spaniards constructed a myth that eighth-century Iberian Christians resisted the Arab invasion to the last breath and stoutly rejected conversion to Islam, but the reality was somewhat different. Many of the Visigothic elites died in military clashes or went into exile in France, large numbers of Christians chose to convert to Islam, and the Jewish minority collaborated with the new invaders. For at least a century and a half following the invasion, there was every indication that Iberia would become yet another province in the orbit of the powerful Abbasid Caliphate with its seat in Baghdad, with the remaining Christians a tolerated minority. Gradually, however, in spite of rather unpromising beginnings, various Christian statelets in the north were consolidated and began making tentative inroads to Al-Andalus in the south. By the fifteenth century, all the elements that would characterize early modern Iberia were in place: the existence of various...
independent Christian kingdoms that were a product of the struggle against the Arab power but also the presence in the peninsula of three communities—Christians, Arabs, and Jews—that were sharply distinguished by their ethnic origins, religion, and culture and each with a significant presence in every region of the peninsula.

Other developments central to understanding the early modern period may also be traced to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The closing decades of the fifteenth century saw the dynastic union between the two most powerful Christian powers in the peninsula, the crowns of Castile and Aragon, represented by Isabel of Castile and Fernando of Aragon respectively. This was a dynastic union, but it would have important unintended consequences in the politico-constitutional sphere. For the first time ever, because the impulse towards unification resulted now from internal forces, the great majority of the inhabitants of the peninsula could think of themselves as members of a unified political entity, subjects of the same monarchy and of rulers born in the peninsula, even though regional identities and political autonomy endured.

As a result of three seminal events, 1492 was a particularly significant year. The first of these was the conquest of the sole remaining Muslim state on Iberian soil, the Kingdom of Granada, by the armies of Isabel and Ferdinand, and its integration in the Spanish monarchy as part of the crown of Castile. One of the consequences of this conquest was the forced conversion of all Muslims in Spain in the immediately following decades. The same year, Ferdinand and Isabel ordered the conversion of all the Jews in the peninsula and the expulsion of those who refused. The most important outcome of these parallel processes was the imposition of a single religion, Catholicism, on the entire Iberian Peninsula, now seen as the bond that would force all its inhabitants to see themselves as members of one community. The voyages of exploration and the conquests that would duly transform the Spanish monarchy into a global power also began in 1492. Spain’s expansion initiated the Spanish migration to the Americas and elsewhere, the conquest of overseas territories, and with it the opening of debates on the characteristics of non-European peoples, especially the Africans and Amerindians, and the possibility of their political and cultural integration in the Iberian world.

The coincidence of political unification of most of ancient Hispania, and imperial expansion under the aegis of the Catholic Kings of Spain in Europe, Africa, America and Asia, provoked peninsular inhabitants, and the subjects of the Spanish Monarchy generally, to begin to reflect on what was “Spain” and who was “Spanish.” The span of time covered by this book, between the end of the fifteenth century and the start of the nineteenth, witnessed profound changes in the meaning of nation and the characteristics of its people. In 1500, few were able to articulate clearly what it was that constituted Spain or “Spanishness.” Some insisted that the Spanish monarchy was not a unified state but a monarchy composed of distinct regional communities, constituted as politically autonomous kingdoms, and that there was no such thing as a Spanish nation or even Spaniards. There were people who might be identified as Castilians or Catalans or Aragonese or Valencians but no people who could be properly called Spaniards. In the seventeenth century, some but still not very many felt able to argue confidently that it was possible to speak of a Spanish community, a Spanish nation, inhabited by people with shared ethnicity, culture, and religion. By the early nineteenth century, the end point of this study, the situation had changed dramatically. It was now claimed, by a majority of the cultural and political elite, that Spain was a nation and that a majority of those born in Spanish territories, whatever their ethnic origins, could be considered “Spanish citizens.”

These transformations and processes are the subject of this book, which in turn is centered around two prominent concepts, nation and race—perhaps the two most polemical concepts in scholarly studies. A desire to understand nation and race in the history of the Iberian world was my original motive for writing this book. To be sure, there are studies of nation and race in given historical periods or regions within the Spanish world. In general, the national question, or the development of the idea of the nation in the Hispanic world, tends to be restricted to peninsular Spain. The question of race, meanwhile, is of primary concern in studies of the Jewish and Morisco questions in Spain but above all in works dealing with Spanish visions of non-European peoples under Spanish sovereignty in the Americas. However, no one has dealt with these subjects in a
connected, systematic fashion during the entirety of the long early modern period and the implications of both for the political, constitutional, and cultural structuring of Iberian society.

There is clearly a very large literature on nation and nationalism to which this study properly belongs. The subject of the nation has attracted the passionate interest of a wide range of scholars. The nation is, to borrow a tremendously apt notion, “imagined,” created not as a result of the observation of verifiable realities but as the outcome of processes of ideological, political, and cultural constructions. Modernization arguments, which count Eric Hobsbawm among their most lucid proponents, are also invaluable. “Like most serious students,” Hobsbawm wrote in his *Nations and Nationalism since 1789*, “I do not regard the ‘nation’ as a primary nor as an unchanging social entity. It belongs exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period,” with a start during the French Revolution. As other scholars have suggested, however, modernist theories deny the possibility of understanding the processes of the creation, or of the invention, of national identities before the eighteenth century. For these authors, led by Anthony Smith, nations are “primordial,” which is to say that nations “generally evolve rather organically out of pre-existing substrata of ethnicity,” territory, language, and religion.

Before the late eighteenth century, no clear sense of Spanishness or a “Spanish nation” existed. Those who make this claim are trying to argue that nations were already fully conceived and understood as such from the Middle Ages or even, in the Spanish case, from the Visigothic period onward, which is clearly erroneous. Nevertheless, the principal idea behind this study is that nations have origins, that they develop from and in specific contexts, and that they cannot be understood without taking into account what the population of the territory in question thought about themselves as a community in each particular period. In this light, it is argued here that the Iberian Peninsula experienced a prolonged contest between distinct visions of the nation and the patria (fatherland). It was a contest over whether all peoples under the Spanish monarchs’ sovereignty should view Spain as their fatherland or believe instead that their true patria and nation was Catalonia or Valencia or Castile. Nations are indeed imagined, but we need to understand their historical evolution, the memories, cultures, traditions, and beliefs shared, and sometimes violently imposed, by the inhabitants of the Spanish monarchy. We need to understand, to use Linda Colley’s term, the “forging” of the nation, in this case throughout the entire early modern period.

The national question, or, more precisely, the debates on whether one or several “nations” lived within Spain and whether its people shared certain characteristics or diverged from one another in nature, history, culture, and language, has gone on unabated since the late fifteenth century. One of the objectives of this study is to assert the specificity of the Spanish case within the literature on the processes of national formation. Nations, as we understand them today, were constructed on a foundation of ideologies and sentiments developed over long periods of time, and this book contends that debates on the nation in early modern Spain were fairly precocious in comparison to other European regions. One of the peculiarities of the Spanish case is that the debate has been going on so long, since at least the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, precisely because of the concurrence of dynastic unification of most of the peninsula and “Spain’s” projection as an imperial power in Europe. Similar debates—and the emergence of the idea of a nation—can also be found in England more or less in the same period, perhaps because it went through similar processes—dynastic union, expansion and occupation of other territories in the British Isles and beyond, and increasing perceptions of English as a nation apart dating from at least the English reformation in the early sixteenth century.

The construction of a nation called Spain was contested throughout the entire early modern period and into the nineteenth century. In the Spanish case, unlike Britain and much of the rest of Europe, the reason for contestation was not religion—Spain remained Catholic during the entire period—but politics and culture. Debates in this period encompassed at least two main themes. The first concerned whether the union of the various kingdoms was going to result in the creation of a joined polity and nation called...
Spain or whether the Spanish monarchy, even if politically united, was going to remain a dynastic state composed of several nations—Castilian, Catalan, Valencian, Navarrese, and others. Second, Spaniards debated whether this was the formation of a single “Spanish” nation, people, and identity or instead the superimposition of a “Castilian” identity on distinct regional identities. A comparable process has been observed in Great Britain, where the notion of Britishness was composed of myths, institutions, values, and a language that were essentially English. Among other things, this book analyzes how the different communities that coexisted in the peninsula responded to the creation of a dominant Castilian or Spanish national identity. In more than one sense, and at various points in time, this was a violent process, one in which the regional communities with a sense of their own separate identity—especially Catalonia—were forced to abandon or at least postpone their own national yearnings.

A majority of early modern Spanish intellectuals and politicians, as well as their nineteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts, believed that a Spanish nation or race had existed since the Iberian Peninsula was populated by Tubal, the grandson of Noah, and his descendants. The pervasiveness of this theory explains the other fundamental concept in this work: race. In the nineteenth century, race acquired a similar meaning in all European languages: “any of the (putative) major groupings of mankind, usually defined in terms of distinct physical features or shared ethnicity, and sometimes (more controversially) considered to encompass common biological or genetic characteristics.” From at least the early nineteenth century, race became generally linked to racism, or the belief that some races are superior to others and that these inferior races could endanger the ethnic purity and cultural identity of the superior races if allowed to live among them.

A central analytical tenet of this work is that, as in the case of the nation, the term race also evolved from the fifteenth century onward, parallel to dominant theories about the existence of distinct human groups (races) or explanations of the causes and consequences of human diversity. Viewed from this long perspective, it is clear that the modern concept of race did not appear until the eighteenth century, and this is also true of theories associated with so-called scientific racism. In the Spanish case, the definitions of race and racism as we understand them today first required the invention of one’s own group as the ideal nation or race, with laudable origins and exemplary physical and mental characteristics, preserved immaculately across time and space. Spanishness was the combination of features and characteristics that distinguished the Spanish from other nations—other Europeans but especially other nations (Jews, Arabs, Americans, and Africans) who lived in territories controlled by Spain.

The transition in the eighteenth century toward the definition of Spaniards as members of a “white race,” and the exaltation of this race as morally and physically superior, was the prerequisite to the categorical representation of the rest of humanity as members of naturally inferior other races—no longer just nations. Race and nation were concepts linked from the outset and developed in conjunction with one another. And, once again, the Spanish case appears exceptional and instructive, for it was in Spain that the debates on “nation” and belonging were from the start influenced by debates on whether the Spaniards were all those born in Spain and its territories (the civic idea of the nation) or only those who could demonstrate that they descended from pure Spanish ancestors (the ethnic idea of the nation).

In part, this is an intellectual history of the evolution of the concepts of nation and race in Spain, as found in the writings of the educated elite—theologians, jurists, explorers, and naturalists. But more importantly, it is a history of the politics of race and nation over a very long stretch of the Spanish Empire. The history of Spain and the Spanish world, like that of other peoples and nations, is marked by continuous ideological and political debates, by the rise of a dominant national project, but also by the resistance, at times violent, of those who wished to defend their rights and identities, national or ethnic. The aim of this study is to link intellectual processes with contemporaneous social and political practices and contests. The intellectual debates and political shifts marked, and with
time changed, the social perceptions and the laws that ordered enormously complex societies on both sides of the Atlantic. These discourses and laws developed in the Hispanic world during the early modern period were used, to paraphrase Edward Said, to dominate and exercise authority over peoples originated in the Americas and Africa but also over minorities in Spain itself (the descendants of Jews and Arabs).6

Like other societies of the time, Iberian society was socially divided, and this social hierarchy determined how an individual was viewed, what laws affected the individual, and an individual’s access to public offices, power, and authority. Spanish society was also, to use Charles Mills’s words, divided following a racial hierarchy, by which some individuals suffered discrimination because they did not belong to the main or dominant nation or race, whatever its definition in each period.7 A link between the emerging sense of the nation and the development of racialist ideas of the social body is not in itself unique to the Spanish case, but its specific circumstances and timing are unique. In the Iberian Peninsula, society was structured based on social hierarchy but also on a racialist basis due to the presence of ethnic groups perceived as non-Spanish. For example, converted Jews and Muslims were all subjects of the Spanish king but not always entitled to the same rights as those identified as Spaniards by origin and blood. In the overseas territories, the dominant criterion for social organization was fundamentally racial, with Spaniards and their American descendants as the dominant group and the rest—Native Americans, Africans, and individuals of mixed blood—as subordinated. As in the case of the nation, the structuring of the society based on racial criteria was also a contested terrain throughout the entire period under consideration.

This is above all a study of Spaniards’ perceptions of self and others, within and outside of Spain. This is not an analysis of European perceptions of Spain and Spaniards. Countless works have been dedicated to that topic, in the belief that understanding what foreigners had written about Spaniards would help explain the reactions and concepts developed by Spaniards about themselves. Certainly, during some of the periods covered in this study, especially the 1700s, Spaniards were often responding to images of their country, history, and character promulgated by foreigners. Spaniards, like any other community, cultivated their own sense of identity based on their own traditions and experiences. The European narrative of Spain and Spaniards in the early modern period is no doubt interesting, and diverting, but it is far less complex and compelling than the history of Spaniards’ visions of themselves.

The thematic and chronological division of this book mirrors its major questions and lines of analysis. The first four chapters cover the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tracing out the emerging definitions of Spain and its people in the peninsula and the Americas in the early formative period. Chapter 1 analyzes the political composition of the Spanish monarchy during this period, while Chapter 2 discusses contemporary theories about the existence of a Spanish ethotype. The third chapter considers the predicament of the converted Jews and Muslims in Spain during this same period, while the fourth looks at Spanish visions of non-European peoples, above all the Africans and the Amerindians. Chapter 5 moves to the eighteenth century and analyzes the processes of national and ethnic creation in Spain, while Chapter 6 looks at these topics in the Spanish-American context. The seventh and last chapter focuses on the political processes and debates that in the early nineteenth century led to the first liberal constitution in Spanish history, known as the Constitution of Cádiz (1812). The constitution gave a new, concrete form to the modern meaning of nation, citizenship, gender, slavery, and race. Yet the “discovery” or “invention” of the Spanish nation was not simply the outcome of these parliamentary debates or the contemporaneous struggle against the foreign French invader. It was the product of political processes and ideological fashioning that had been occurring since the beginning of the sixteenth century. This book is an attempt to understand those primordial ideas about the Spanish nation and the contexts that shaped them—on their own terms but also because these concepts and ideas in some vital ways continue to inform the identities and struggles of modern Spaniards.