



THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN SPAIN

Posted on May 1, 2020 by Nicolas Klein



Part One - The Historical, Political And Intellectual Context: Has Spain Contributed Anything To Western Civilization?

In 1782, as part of the *Encyclopédie méthodique par ordre des matières*, published in France by [Charles-Joseph Panckoucke](#), the geographer [Nicolas Masson de Morvilliers](#) expressed himself in these terms regarding the country of Spain: "The Spanish [...] exercised in Europe and in the Indies, cruelties which make one shudder and which have made them odious to the peoples of the two worlds. [...] Spain is perhaps the most ignorant nation in Europe. All overseas work is at an end. The monks lay down the law... [...] Today, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Poland itself, Germany, Italy, England and France, all these peoples, whether enemies, friends, or rivals, all burn with generous emulation for the advancement of science and the arts [...]. Each of them, so far, has made some useful discovery, which has turned to the benefit of humanity! But what do we owe to Spain? And for two centuries, for four, for ten, what has it done for Europe?"

This judgment, brutal as it is, is far from isolated in pre-revolutionary Europe. [Voltaire](#) does not have a better opinion of the historical role of Spain. He sees [Philippe II](#) (1556-1598) as a kind of "demon of the south," the perfect counterpoint to the good [Henry IV](#) so tolerant. At a time when modern nations were really starting to take shape and stereotypes were fundamental anchors to their perception, [Montesquieu](#) is not any kinder towards Spain.

The same rabid Hispanophobia is found in many authors of the time, from the [Marquis d'Argens](#) to [Father Reynal](#) and [Madame d'Aulnoy](#). Though Portugal suffers more or less the same fate, it is not the same for Italy, the cradle of European civilization. In addition, a similar trend can easily be seen in the following century. All of Europe is concerned with this propensity to see in the Iberian Peninsula a sort of desert when it comes to civilization, the arts and the sciences.

This is why the decision of the French authorities to censor the *Encyclopédie méthodique* at the request of the Spanish Ambassador to Paris, [Pedro de Bolea y Pons de Mendoza](#), Count of Aranda, did not convince anyone for too long. Everyone knew already that the author had only openly said what all the European elites muttered under their breath among themselves.

The Bourbons of Spain: Promoters Of Enlightenment Thought

It is not for us to settle this debate here-and-now, a debate which has animated Iberian historiography for more than two centuries; nor shall we even enumerate the multiple contributions of Spain to European and world culture. On the other hand, we may still be surprised at the virulence of the above-mentioned remarks. Was there not a philosophical light which, issuing from the European Enlightenment, shone across the Pyrenees and carried across the ideas then in vogue in the other nations of the continent (progress, science, rationality, reform, education, elevation of the spirit)?

Although much less known than their English, French or Germanic colleagues, the Enlightenment thinkers and writers, in Spain, were active and fruitful. They benefited from the accession to the throne of the Bourbons from France in the person of the Duke of Anjou, [Philippe V](#) (1700-1746), whose descendants still reign today. Until the [Napoleonic invasion](#) (1808-1814), his sons, [Louis I](#) (January-August 1724), [Ferdinand VI](#) (1746-1759) and [Charles III](#) (1759-1788), as well as his grandson [Charles IV](#) (1788-1808), succeeded one another as the heads of a country which they were trying to transform deeply, in particular from an economic and technological point of view. It is the Golden Age of what is called in Spain, the *Ilustración*, a term closer to the English "Enlightenment," or the German *Aufklärung* than to the French *Lumières* (although we also find the expression, *siglo de las Luces* in the language of [Cervantes](#)).

It is indeed French influence that is decisive in the development of this particularly obvious intellectual movement during the reign of Charles III, the Spanish prototype of the *déspota ilustrado* ("enlightened despot"). Having gained experience as the King of Naples and Sicily, from 1734 to 1759, the eldest son of Philippe V and [Elisabeth Farnese](#), was closest to the Hispanic reformist movements - even if his father, trained in full [Grand Siècle](#) style by [Fénelon](#) and the [Duke of Beauvilliers](#), had a solid intellectual background. Throughout the period, there were an increasing number of bodies created, from academies (including that of the Spanish language) to learned societies and think tanks which enlivened the life of ideas beyond the Pyrenees and renewed scientific research and technology.

The ministers surrounding Charles III - whether Spanish, like the [Count of Aranda](#), [Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes](#), [José Moñino y Redondo](#), Count of Floridablanca, as well as [Pablo de Olavide](#), or foreigners, like the Genoese [Leopoldo de Gregorio](#), Marquis d'Esquilache - were all instrumental in the development of a progressive spirit within Spain.

However, it should not be forgotten that, as in France or England, these statesmen, philosophers and writers whom these learned bodies permitted to flourish were part of a minority (Spanish historiography

speaks about them as the *minoría selecta*). In addition, the ministers of the "enlightened despot" did not arise from nothing, since they pursued their studies within traditional social structures (aristocracy, clergy, petty bourgeoisie), as well as in the Colegios Mayores, those universities of the Golden Age which for a long time were marked by scholasticism. Among them were a majority of *golillas*, jurists (*letrados*) trained in Salamanca, Valladolid or Alcalá de Henares, as well as their lifelong opponents, the *manteístas*, who came from less prestigious universities.

Controlled Ferment

It is therefore within an official and oft-controlled context (some historians speak of *cultura tutelada*) that the Spanish Enlightenment flourished. It owed its protection, as we have said, to Charles III and his advisers, but, more generally, to royal absolutism, which favored the implementation, throughout Europe, of a series of first-class modernizing measures; and Spain was no exception to this phenomenon.

But the monarch was not the only one to have a say in Spanish intellectual life. Works published in Spain had to obtain the imprimatur from the [Council of Castile](#), and more particularly from the Printing Court (*Juzgado de Imprentas*), which could censor them. The procedure was identical for foreign publications and for well-informed periodicals, such as [La gaceta de Madrid](#) and *El mercurio*.

Internal Opposition To The Enlightenment

In general, opposition to what some pejoratively called *filosofía*, or even *filosofismo*, was not uncommon in Spain - any more than it was in the rest of the continent. The questioning of theology as the queen discipline of the intellect, the rejection of the worldview imposed by the [Counter-Reformation](#), the surpassing of the baroque, and the analysis of the sensory universe beyond the Aristotelian categories, in force in medieval and modern scholasticism, were all factors that shook up a cultural and educational elite reluctant to give up its place.

The unpopularity of the reforms is reflected, for example, in the revolt against the [Minister Esquilache](#) (*motín de Esquilache*). In March 1766, a [popular rebellion](#) broke out in Madrid, and then in other Spanish cities, against the decompartmentalization of the internal market in the midst of the food crisis, but also, and above all else, against the ban on certain elements of traditional Spanish attire.

All this contributed to undermining the beginning of the reign of Charles III. The latter was forced to accept the resignation and exile of Leopoldo de Gregorio, whose downfall was less because of the prohibition against wearing the [chamberg](#) (a soft hat with a wide brim; very fashionable at the time) than on the intrinsic limits to Bourbon reformism.

The burdens of society were quickly attributed by the monarch and the "philosophers" to the influence of the Catholic religion, which must be limited, in particular the Inquisition (which was already only a shadow of itself); and by expelling the Jesuits from all Spanish possessions.

A Thirst For Reform In Madrid And In The Provinces

At the same time as the movement to construct nation-states (which started almost everywhere in Europe at this time) the modernization of Spain appeared as an absolute necessity in the eyes of the Enlightenment of the Pyrenees. The ministers and thinkers belonging to this idea were aware that the recovery of their country, after the difficult years of the reigns of [Philippe IV](#) (1621-1665) and [Charles II](#) (1665-1700), could only come about by the adoption of solutions already tested in France, in England or in certain German principalities.

As contemporary historians point out, it was more the theme of Spanish decadence, the (necessarily subjective) perception of a decadence, rather than the reality of such a phenomenon which pushed men of letters and the intellectuals to think about the causes of the malaise which affected their country.

The reasons put forward in the 18th-century (and then during the years that followed) were numerous, often imprecise and generally not very convincing (even grotesque): The Spanish disdain for technology and manual work; the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, and then the [Moriscos](#) (those Muslims who converted to Christianity as a facade) in 1613; the omnipotence of the [Mesta](#), that association (it seems today more a lobby) of owners of nomadic sheep herds; the military drain that maintained the dominance of the [Habsburgs](#) in Europe; the constant drain of emigration to America; the deficient administration of the House of Austria, etc.

The abundant reflection generated by such considerations helped to create the feeling that it was not that Spain had problems, but that Spain was a problem in itself.

The economic and institutional obstacles to the development of Spain within the European context were real. In this sense, evoking the omnipotence of the Mesta (responsible, at least in part, for the agricultural backwardness from which the country suffered), or the dependence of royal finances on metals from the New World, or the French bank was certainly relevant. Nevertheless, the multiplication of the sources of complaints, and the obsession of some, both in Spain and abroad, with the idea of decadence, ultimately made any ilustrada philosophy sterile.

Fortunately, this was not the view of all representatives of the Spanish Enlightenment; quite the contrary. Often moderate and pragmatic thinkers and statesmen of the period proposed more or less ambitious reforms in all directions. It seemed indeed difficult that all could succeed and some were even horrendous failures - which fed, at regular intervals, the melancholy of Spanish intellectuals, who saw in the reign of Charles III a missed opportunity to transform their country in a fundamental way.

However, it must be said, many of these measures did bear fruit so that Spain has long lived "on" the legacy of the *Ilustración*. We can already cite a quite few:

- The creation of learned societies, reflection clubs (the future Spanish casinos in the 19th-century). These were academies and gatherings whose aim was to work for the public good and were found throughout the breadth of Spain, and not only in Madrid;
- The desire to better educate the people, in particular by suppressing certain entertainment of a religious nature, such as the sacramental autos (pieces of a hagiographic character, very popular in medieval and modern Spain), but also by attacking the ecclesiastical monopoly on universities;
- Decisions aimed at improving the social situation of the poorest Spaniards, in particular by fighting begging and modernizing agriculture and irrigation, whether from a theoretical or practical point of view;
- The reorganization of the state, the territorial administration, and the American colonies, in particular in order to derive greater economic profit;
- The repopulation of certain demographic deserts, as in the Sierra Morena, north of Cordoba;
- The stimulation of nascent industry, especially in Catalonia, and the foundation of royal factories on a more or less Colbertist model.

The real intellectual and political ferment that Spain experienced in the years 1760-1780 was not limited to the capital. Many thinkers and decision-makers were born and matured in Catalonia ([Antoni de Capmany](#), [Jaume Bonnells](#), [Josep Climent](#)), in Galicia ([Benito Jerónimo Feijoo](#), [Martín Sarmiento](#)), in

Aragon (the count of Aranda), in the old Kingdom from Murcia (Floridablanca), in the Principality of Asturias (Campomanes, [Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos](#)), in Andalusia ([José Cadalso](#)), and even in the American colonies of Spain (like Olavide, who was born in Lima). It is therefore no coincidence that, in 1962, the Cuban writer, [Alejo Carpentier](#), located the action of his novel, [El siglo de las Luces](#), in Havana.

This ferment did not come about without a series of ideological clashes that drew upon rivalries from before the reign of Charles III. The Spanish Enlightenment was not born out of thin air and did not owe its success solely to French or English influence. It had its roots in an older reform movement that consisted in the stinging denial of all those who wanted to see in Spain a nation without thought of its own.

The [original, French version](#) of this article appeared in [Revue Conflits](#) and was translated by N. Dass.

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The [image](#) shows, "Philip V in Hunting Costume," by Miguel Jacinto Meléndez; painted in 1712.

