

DECADENCE AND REGENERATION IN 19TH CENTURY SPAIN. THE PROJECTIVE LOOK TOWARDS AMERICA

CÉSAR RINA SIMÓN

PROFESSOR OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EXTREMADURA

The Kingdom of Spain entered the 19th century in a deep political and institutional crisis, invaded by Napoleonic troops, without dynastic references and in a deep colonial crisis that would cause the gradual loss of the overseas empire. The economic and social backwardness in comparative European terms, the low industrial development and the conversion of its territory into a romantic space imagotype, bordering between east and west, unable to enter progress and dominated by intransigence and violence, add on to these political factors. These elements formed a notion of peninsular decadence that, far from beginning with the “disaster” of 1898, had a considerable and transversal imprint in political cultures, in the management of imperialism and in the construction of the nation-state throughout the 19th century. The spread of the idea of decadence among the political and educated class of the country led to the emergence of substitutionary nationalisms: expectations of regeneration from the projection and extension of national influence to other territories. Various projects thus emerged, which based regeneration on international alliances, on conquests - such as the colonial wars in Mexico and Morocco in 1859 - or on political and cultural fraternisation programmes such as Iberism, Pan-Latinism or Hispanic Americanism.

In this sense, the retrospective and nostalgic view of Spanish nationalism was no exception. The processes of nationalisation throughout Europe shared the same *leitmotif*: the decadence-regeneration tension, the idea of a time of national splendour, coincident with an imperial past or a golden age, confronted with the

decadence of the present. Nationalisms also shared a sense of absence, of unfinished entity, whether nostalgic with past empires or exploits - as is evident in the Spanish case by the secession of part of its colonial empire -, or by the loss of identity horizons that the nationalising push would end up straightening. Hannah Arendt pointed out the paradoxical spatial tension in the construction of nation-states in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: on the one hand, focused on the search for a homogeneous national group and bounded by borders but, at the same time, a political, cultural and even ethnic projection to other territories in which their international prestige was encoded. Both looks, the interior and the expansive one, far from contradicting themselves, formed the substratum in which the national imaginaries took root.

A key concept in the expansive view of European nationalisms was that of “civilisation”, understood in a polysemic way as a cultural, ethnic, linguistic or historical space that transcended the limits of the State and that articulated a horizon of “natural” geostrategic relations. Civilisation could be a space of political-military expansion, but also a terrain in which to establish supra-state alliances following cultural patterns: Pan-Slavianism, Pan-Germanism, Pan-Celticism, Hispano-Americanism, Lusotropicalism, Europeanism, etc. Since the middle of the 19th century, the image of a Spanish “civilization” was consolidated, covering the entire Iberian Peninsula, the former American colonial empire and, in certain contexts related to the European hegemony of the northern countries, the Latin Mediterranean. In all these projections, the past was the scenario in which genealogies were articulated whose recovery would serve as a remedy for decadence and as a mobilising agent of nationalisation.

The Spanish historiography has focused the irruption of the external and Americanist projections in the defeat of 1898. Without diminishing the importance of this event, we consider that the “98 effect” has overshadowed a long-standing process

and it goes back to bourgeois liberal revolutions and positivist attempts to create a cultural community - in the future, political - of alliances and rapprochement between like-minded nations by history, language or geography. These ties could resituate Spain in an international scenario characterised by the formation of great empires and thus overcome the decline. As Alda Blanco, Ferran Archilés or Josep Fradera have pointed out, Spain was configured as an imperial nation throughout the 19th century and colonial management cannot be studied as an appendix or a footnote. On the contrary, it formed part of the core of the administration of the State and of the national imaginaries.

Why, then, does the year 98 continue to act as a watermark of decay and its projective regeneration proposals? We could point out multiple factors, highlighting the following among them: the academic over-representation in quantitative terms of historians dedicated to researching the 20th century; the historiographical bias of placing the origins of the processes in the same origins of their chronological fields; the classification of intellectual groups around generations whose members spared no effort to imagine themselves as the promoters of national debates; and the mimesis with other decadent processes with shared features: the Dreyfus affair, the crisis of the ultimatum in Portugal in 1890, the Italian defeat at Adua in 1896 or the crisis of Fachoda of 1898. The spirit of an era that Max Nordau portrayed in *Degeneration*, a work translated into Spanish by Salmerón in 1893.

The analysis of the press, the parliamentary debates, the historiographical narratives and those of the imaginary identities of the Spanish political cultures confirm the centrality of the imperial question - and its nostalgia - throughout the 19th century, as well as the search for regeneration through the articulation of alliances with the young American republics. A good example of this are the nationalist commemorative cycles, which were marked by the discovery and colonisation of America in Spain and

which culminated in the Colombian commemorative feats of the fourth centenary in 1892; a public expression of the direct relationship between national regeneration and Hispano-Americanism.

From the mid-19th century, numerous publications began to include American news sections. The *Revista española de Ambos Mundos* began to be published in 1855; *La América*, in 1857; the *Revista Hispano Americana*, in 1870; *La Ilustración Española e Hispanoamericana*, in 1877; *La Academia. Revista de cultura hispano portuguesa, latino-americana*, in 1877, to cite just a few examples. Hispano-Americanism was also transversal to all political cultures and to the different ways of understanding the nation. Menéndez Pelayo, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Castelar, Rafael María de Labra, Luis Vidart or Pi y Margall shared pages, in 1893, in an anthology of Hispanic-American exaltation. For its part, the Royal Spanish Academy had shown interest in having presence in America since 1861; it began to integrate American academics in 1866, and to open headquarters in the continent in 1873.

The notion of decadence was neither an original idea of the Generation of '98 nor the result of a resounding defeat to the United States. The theme was present in the national imaginaries from the origins of the liberal State. Many of the works that we consider to be references of the literature of 98 were published years and even decades before the disaster: *Estudios sobre el engrandecimiento y la decadencia de España* by Pedregal y Cañedo; *L'Espagne telle qu'elle est* by Valentí Almirall; *La decadencia de la civilización de España* by Pompeyo Gener; *Los males de la patria* by Lucas Mallada; *En torno al Casticismo* by Miguel de Unamuno; or *Idearium español* by Ángel Ganivet. We can therefore point out that the dialectic between decadence and regeneration, imperial nostalgia or civilisational projection towards America, were at the heart of the Spanish national project of the 19th century, and not only from the National Catholic and conservative orbit, it was also very present in progressive and

republican political cultures. It is true that the past commemoration raised nuances: National Catholicism celebrated evangelisation and the military empire, while republicanism pointed out the technical feat, the progress that allowed the “encounter” and the role of Spain in the American “civilisation”. In any case, the celebration of the American past was a way of summoning the future, of projecting national redemption into a supra-state project.

Until the 1870s, the main projective regenerative mechanism was Iberism; the expectation that the union or rapprochement of Portugal and Spain would allow both countries to recover their hegemonic position. This idea was connected with romantic nationalisms and with plans to reorganise the European map following rational criteria - historical, geographical or ethnographic - against the *status quo* formed by dynastic struggles, responsible for the peninsular split. After the failure of the Glorious Revolution, the Monarchical Restoration left aside the Iberian regenerationism, a desire surpassed by a project more cultural and indeterminate than political, whose elasticity facilitated their integration into the national imaginaries from different ideological poles. The rapid spread of Hispanic Americanism as a regenerative tool is also explained by the role of intermediate cultural agents in the processes of nationalisation - athenaeums, associations, cafes, etc.

In conclusion, we note that Hispano-Americanism was a cultural and political projection closely linked to the decadence-regeneration binomial, which arose at the same time as the American independences and which in the middle of the 19th century was part of historiographical narratives and Spanish political cultures. This civilisational projection did not translate into any specific political project beyond commemorations, the integration of symbols, uses of the past and declarations of fraternisation. However, it did act as a unifier of the various ideas of the Spanish nation and as an expectation of regeneration.

Basic Bibliography

Álvarez Junco, José. (2001). *Mater Dolorosa. La idea de España en el siglo XIX*. Madrid, Taurus.

Archilés, Ferran. (2013), ¿Ni imperio ni imperialismo? El imaginario nacional español y el imperialismo africanista en la España de la Restauración (c.1880-c.1909). In *Nación y nacionalización. Una perspectiva europea comparada*, Valencia, PUV, pp. 201-224.

Blanco, Alda. (2012). *Cultura y conciencia imperial en la España del siglo XIX*. Valencia, PUV.

Eastman, Scott. (2021). *A Missionary Nation. Race, Religion, and Spain's Age of Liberal Imperialism, 1848-1881*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.

Fernández Sebastián, Javier. (2021), *Historia conceptual del Atlántico ibérico. Lenguajes, tiempos, revoluciones*. Madrid, Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Fradera, Josep. (2015), *La nación imperial (1750-1918)*. Barcelona, Edhasa.

Marcilhacy, David. (2010). *Raza hispana: hispanoamericanismo e imaginario nacional en la España de la Restauración*. Madrid, CEPC.

Moreno Luzón, Javier. (2021). *Centenariomanía. Conmemoraciones hispánicas y nacionalismo español*. Madrid, Marcial Pons.

Pérez Vejo, Tomás. (2015). *España imaginada. Historia de la invención de una nación*. Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg.

Rina Simón, César. (2018). Proyección exterior, hispanoamericanismo y regeneración nacional en la península Ibérica en el siglo XIX. En *Historia Mexicana*, LXVII/4, pp. 1597-1631.

Rina Simón, César. (2016). *Iberismos. Expectativas peninsulares en el siglo XIX*. Madrid, Funcas.

Sepúlveda, Isidoro. (2005). *El sueño de la Madre patria. Hispanoamericanismo y nacionalismo*. Madrid, Marcial Pons.

Tomasoni, Matteo y Rina Simón, César. (2021). Ecos imperiales: diálogos sobre la ¿el? imperio nostalgia. *Revista de historia Jerónimo Zurita*, 98.



European and Ibero-American Academy
of Yuste Foundation
Translated by **Verónica Guillén Melo**