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Review of Flocel Sabate and Luis Adao da Fonseca, eds., *Catalonia and Portugal: The Iberian Peninsula from the Periphery*

Rita Costa-Gomes

Towson University, costagomes@fake.com

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Sabaté, Flocel and Fonseca, Luis Adão da, (eds). *Catalonia and Portugal. The Iberian Peninsula from the Periphery*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2015. 529 pp.

Iberian history, whichever way we wish to define and practice it, is a demanding field of research. This book reveals some of its obstacles and possibilities, as it also brings out the need for a critical reflection about the historiographies of Spain and Portugal if other spaces beyond those of the nation-states are to be considered. Taking the route of a historicization of “identities”, a fluid concept as this book proposes it, is but one way to take this exciting journey. National identities prevail over other forms of group identity in this volume, an implicit tendency that does not escape the attention of a few contributors. It is easily detected in the frequent use of possessives throughout the book: “our authors”, “our own vision”, “our geographic location”, etc., in which “we” refers to the Catalans, or the Portuguese, as self-evident, unchanging entities across time and space. Uneasiness sets in, and the essays that make it explicit and search for more neutral and detached perspectives are among the most productive and useful in this collection.

The book is composed of nineteen articles, the majority of them devoted to Catalonia (twelve, against seven focusing on Portugal). It conveys the results of a project funded by the European Science Foundation aiming at the comparative study of European regions, briefly described in concluding remarks (De Boer). The participation of both teams of researchers, specialists in the history of Portugal or the history of Catalonia, naturally expresses the agendas and internal debates within the historical field of each country. In the case of Portugal, those debates include a reassessment of the Habsburg period of “dynastic union” between 1580 and 1640, as well as a focus on the late medieval centuries (roughly, between 1200 and 1450) and their echoes in the 1800s. The articles about the language, historiography, and historical myths pertaining to Catalonia and the Crown of Aragon concentrate mostly on earlier chronologies. But there is another important discussion thread about concepts of Spain and of “Hispanic” identity in more recent periods, in particular the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Comparative arguments are rare in this collection of texts, regardless of a few ideas suggested in the introduction by editors Sabaté and Fonseca. For instance, a comparative hypothesis that would deserve a more thorough discussion in these pages is the contrast between ‘historical paths’ in which “territorial cohesion” and the unifying action of monarchical rule in Portugal would find a counterpart in “the cohesion of the society itself” in Catalonia (32). The strict specialization practiced by most historians today, as demonstrated in these essays, undoubtedly represents an obstacle to such comparisons. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that specialists of Portugal in this book more often quote authors writing in Spanish or Catalan, while as those of Catalonia seldom quote scholarship published in Portuguese. In an interesting text toward the end of the volume, Òscar Costa explains how a “nostalgic view” of Portugal in Catalan culture is accompanied by a persistent lack of familiarity with its actual “distant” realities, a tendency the authors of these essays clearly exemplify. Hence, the importance and interest of this volume is in a movement towards mutual scientific engagement of both communities of historians.

Common themes in the volume suggest some directions of such engagement. Parallel attempts at looking at images of the Middle Ages in the 1800s, for instance, allow for interesting conclusions (Cattini and Cao, Pereira). Several texts explore the history of concepts and the origins of place names within Iberia (García-Moreno, Pizarro, Cingolani, Escartí, Simon), in an effort to better define the different meanings that words such as “Spain”, “Hispania”, “Portugal”, “Gothia”, “Gallia”, “Catalonia” acquire over time, as means of identification of political territories or geographical spaces of the peninsula. How discrete historical memories emerging in medieval texts relate to history writing and linguistic realities is another common theme of interest, in particular in Catalonia (Zimmerman, Rasico, Cingolani). The importance of feudalism in the emergence of written forms of the Catalan language, for instance, is analyzed by some specialists connecting textual production to specific systems of power (Moran and Rabella, Rasico). Medieval and early modern historical works would mostly express moments of self-perception (“prises de conscience”, as Zimmerman puts it) of identity and alterity in both Catalonia and Portugal, but in those works the memories of the nobility appear intertwined with those of medieval monarchies (Cingolani, Pizarro). Layer upon layer of readings and accidents of textual transmission (namely, through translation and re-appropriation) reveal how discourses of national identity were reinforced or otherwise critically judged in the context of specific political choices (Miralles, Cardim). A recognition of discontinuities and multiple political choices appears inevitable (Fonseca and Costa, Pimenta), since the Portugal of Afonso Henriques (r. 1139-1185) is not, either territorially, linguistically, and even in broader cultural terms, the same as that of Afonso V (r. 1438-1481) or Philip II (r. 1581-1598).

The interrogation of legal traditions and institutional developments across Iberia (Montagut), although taking less space than the analysis of historiographical traditions and historical myths, is made here against the background of a dispassionate attempt at a synthesis about early modern monarchies and their historiographical interpretations that balances the concepts of “composite monarchies” or “dynastic agglomerates” against more encompassing theories of “confessionalization” and “state building” (Von Friedeburg). An isolated but quite suggestive contribution of Lúcia Rosas shows how art and non-textual sources could contribute to a discussion of the Iberian dimension of the history of Portugal and that of Catalonia.

A final word about linguistic choices. Texts in Castilian and in French achieve a clarity and succinct expression in this book that are lacking in the English versions of texts originally written in Iberian languages. A more thorough revision would be needed to make some of these texts more palatable to a reader of English. In spite of this problem, there is much in this volume of interest to the readers of the bulletin of the ASPHS.

Rita Costa-Gomes
Towson University