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Review of: José Álvarez-Junco, *Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations*

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José Álvarez-Junco. *Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011. 408 pp.

This volume is mostly a translation of José Álvarez Junco's magisterial *Mater Dolorosa: La idea de España en el siglo XIX*, published by Taurus in 2001. But the original title and publisher are not mentioned on the copyright page nor anywhere else. The author in his introduction alludes to translation problems; it was a "drawn-out process," he says (5), and indeed it reads like it was. Portions of this book are every bit as compelling as *Mater Dolorosa*, but others make for very painful reading. If it were not for the fact that the bilingual reader can feel the original Spanish syntax just below the surface and mentally translate back into the original, at times one would not know what was going on.

That is a shame, because this book contains important and engaging ideas; it is worth pointing out that *Mater Dolorosa* was awarded Spain's national history prize. Essentially, Álvarez Junco (no hyphen, despite Manchester's title page) argues that "Spain" is a constant presence over the past five centuries, whether in the world of symbols, the world of diplomacy and politics, or both. The word and its baggage were not eternal, but they meant something. He is less brilliant when he wanders back in history than when he stays in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but his tales of Visigoths, Moors, Santiago, Numancia, conquest, and reconquest provide a necessary backdrop to the subsequent debates surrounding the main event: resistance against Napoleon and the Cortes of Cádiz. How the war became known decades later as the "War of Independence" is a fascinating story: "'Spain,' the Spanish people, had stood up as one against 'the French,' or against Napoleon, in a 'War of Independence' and emerged triumphant... It would have been difficult to find a more auspicious beginning to the process of contemporary nationalization." (98) The section on the "War of Independence," one of the book's best, also addresses how the liberals, both at the Cortes of Cádiz and later, dipped into Spanish history to find the alleged seeds of the alleged freedom they were now championing as an alleged people. It was a historically-informed mythology they were creating.

Chapter 4, "National history and collective memory," is another outstanding section, and it is well translated. Here Álvarez Junco takes us through post-Napoleon Europe's scramble to "recover" its true national past, a process Spain leaped into after Cádiz, whose constitution defined who "Spaniards" were. "The peculiarity of this age is that almost everything, including the so-called

positive sciences, exhibited national traits” (127), he says, and he discusses the arts, literature, and science to make his point. But history clearly was the field most urgently in need of correction. Encyclopedic histories were written, praises were sung, betrayals lamented, traditions invented. This was when the 1521 defeat of the Comuneros was identified as the moment when “Spaniards” lost their ancient freedom. “Thus it was,” Álvarez Junco writes, “that the ‘War of Independence’ came to be so deeply lodged in nationalist mythology: as the jewel in the crown of the glorious series of reconquests of the patriotic paradise.” (151)

Sections follow concerning the intertwining of the conservative church and the nationalist cause, as well as on Romanticism. Throughout the book, the author repeatedly differentiates elite and popular responses to ideas and events and traces the uneasy relationship among the elites, the state, and the crown.

The final chapters take us through the breakup of the empire to 1898, the disaster that wasn’t. Throughout the nineteenth century, liberal notions of the nation underwent transformations that led to nothing, and the state likewise failed. Divisiveness ruled, despite occasionally successful cultural, educational, and military attempts to establish national sentiment. By the time Cuba and the Philippines were lost, the so-called “regenerationist” movement, the new face of nationalism, had decided that getting Spain’s own house in order made more sense than clinging to imperial dreams.

Aside from suffering from an unworthy translation, there is an audience problem with this book. Scholars of Spain presumably read *Mater Dolorosa* anyway (and if they have not, they should), so they do not need the English-language version. Álvarez Junco explicitly and correctly says in the introduction that Spanish nationalism has not been adequately dealt with in the literature and that no historian has done for Spain what, say, Eugen Weber did for France (with his *Peasants into Frenchmen*). So one intuits that he is aiming for European historians in general, and those interested in nationalism, in particular. But making Spanish history comprehensible to the outside world unfortunately entails a great deal of background explanation and/or removal of events and characters. The latter is particularly true with nineteenth-century political history, whose cast of thousands not even historians can keep straight. Therefore I fear that non-Hispanists will not have an easy time of it with this volume. Advanced students who do not read Spanish have several of Álvarez Junco’s articles to choose from; in particular, one published in *History and Memory* in 2002 is an introduction to the important ideas contained in this book.

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