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The rise and fall of “respectable” Spanish liberalism, 1808–1923: an explanatory framework

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the reasons behind both the consolidation of what I have termed “respectable” liberalism between the 1830s and the 1840s and its subsequent decline and fall between 1900 and 1923. In understanding both processes I study the links established between “respectable” liberals and propertied elites, the monarchy, and the Church. In the first phase these links served to consolidate the liberal polity. However, they also meant that many tenets of liberal ideology were compromised. Free elections were undermined by the operation of *caciquismo*, monarchs established a powerful position, and despite the Church hierarchy working with liberalism, the doctrine espoused by much of the Church was still shaped by the Counter-Reformation. Hence, “respectable” liberalism failed to achieve a popular social base. And the liberal order was increasingly denigrated as part of the corrupt “oligarchy” that ruled Spain. Worse still, between 1916 and 1923 the Church, monarch, and the propertied elite increasingly abandoned the liberal Monarchist Restoration. Hence when General Primo de Rivera launched his coup the rug was pulled from under the liberals’ feet and there was no one to cushion the fall.

KEYWORDS

Spanish history; liberalism; church; monarchy

The history of Spanish liberalism between 1808 and 1923 looks on the surface rather contradictory. Despite the fact that Spain was in western European terms economically rather backwards, in the early nineteenth century liberals were surprisingly successful. They were able to take on the Old Order, seize power in the mid-1830s, and erect the foundations of a liberal state and society. And yet, over the next century the revolutionary élan of what contemporaries came to refer to as “respectable” liberals (Burdial and Cruz Romeo 1998, 76) dissipated, and increasingly, in the minds of much of the Spanish intelligentsia and wider sectors of public opinion, the image of the archetypal liberal passed from being that of a talented and sincere intellectual and/or activist who was fighting for liberty and an end to the privileges enjoyed by the Church and aristocracy, to that of an electoral fixer in a smoke-filled room who was doing the bidding of the “oligarchy.” The consequence could be seen in 1923, when the military, with the tacit support of King Alfonso XIII and much of the propertied elite, launched a coup against the liberal Monarchist Restoration, and no one came to the aid of the regime.

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The causes behind the consolidation of Spanish liberalism, on the one hand, and its decline and fall on the other, have been the subject of much controversy. In this article I will develop the argument that they were, in fact, closely connected. That the strategies pursued by “respectable” Spanish liberals to strengthen their position in the 1840s and 1850s, most notably the close relationship established with propertied elites, and with the institutions of the Church and monarchy, were in fact to prove their undoing from the 1900s. This was related to the very different contexts within which liberals operated in both these periods. In the first it proved possible to build a system in which political leaders and local “notables” were to a large extent able to assert social and political control. In the second, the cold winds of mass social and political mobilization would increasingly call the cosy world of Spanish liberalism into question.

The Cortes of Cádiz and revolutionary Spanish liberalism

As in other parts of Europe, liberal ideas first took hold in Spain through a select intelligentsia, drawn from the ranks of office holders, the liberal professions (with lawyers particularly prominent), the military, the clergy, and rentier landowners (Álvarez Junco 1985, 102–6; Cruz 1996, 140–53). Like their European counterparts, the early Spanish liberals elaborated a discourse at the core of which was the argument that the Old Regime was both economically efficient and unjust. On the one hand, they affirmed, all impediments to a free market should be swept away. Chief amongst these impediments were Church land held in “dead hands,” entailed noble land, and the guild system. On the other, they maintained that the nobles and Church enjoyed unfair privileges, while other social classes were unjustly burdened. To remedy this absolutism had to be dismantled and replaced by a constitutional, parliamentary system of government based on “national sovereignty,” which would uphold the “natural rights of man” and guarantee freedom of expression and an independent judiciary (Artola 2003, 105–28).

Echoing the language of the French Revolution, Spanish liberals therefore vociferously criticized the *señoríos* (fiefdoms) held by the nobility and the Church over much of the territory. Thus, for example, in the debate in the Cádiz Cortes on the abolition of the *señoríos* the liberal deputy, Manuel García Herreros, intoned:

The nation must recover its inherent and imprescriptible rights; in this way feudal rights and fiefdoms will be brought to an end, there will be no lands under seigneurial rule (*cotos* and *señoríos particulares*), there will be no men who have the power of life and death over their vassals (*señores de horca y cuchillo*), and all vassalage will end. (Bahamonde and Martínez 1998, 59)

And after their abolition, in 1813 the leading Valencian liberal, Manuel Bertrán de Lis, celebrated that the local peasantry could now cultivate their land “without a merciless noble being able to oblige you to share with him the fruits of your labour” (Pérez Garzón 2007, 304). This discourse, attacking the privileges of the Old Regime, was maintained during the 1820–3 Liberal Triennium and during the final liberal assault on the structures of the Old Regime in the 1830s.

However, after the traumatic experience of the radicalization of the French Revolution, and especially the rise of Jacobinism and the Terror, from the 1800s the continental European liberal elite moved in a conservative direction, paying particular attention to the British constitutional system. They recognized that all members of a nation should enjoy basic civil rights, but argued that only those who were independent and educated had sufficient

“capacity” to be considered “political citizens” and hence have the right to vote and be elected. And the possession of property was generally seen as a guarantor of such independence. Hence, not only all women (seen as dependent on their fathers or husbands) should be excluded from political citizenship, but also the majority non-educated and non-property owning male population. At the same time, they became more inclined to compromise with representatives of the Old Regime in order, as they saw it, to strengthen liberalism’s social base and maintain social peace. This meant instituting a property franchise at elections, retaining a monarchy and giving it wide-ranging powers, and dividing parliament into a lower and upper chamber, with Old Regime interests represented in the latter (Kahan 2003).

Such a perspective proved problematic for the Spanish liberals to adopt between 1808 and 1814 because it would mean disenfranchising the bulk of the Spanish *pueblo* (people), who in their eyes had heroically risen up for Spanish freedoms in the face of the French invader, with the result that the 1812 Cádiz Constitution had a strong democratic and egalitarian streak (Pérez Garzón 2007, 250–6 and 283–308). Along with the decision to extend (albeit indirect) suffrage to the vast majority of the male population in peninsular Spain, it also enumerated core civil rights and enshrined the liberal principle that sovereignty should rest with the nation with few concessions to the Old Order. Parliament would consist of a single chamber. The classical liberal divisions of powers between the legislature, judiciary, and executive would operate, with the monarch charged with running the executive. But it was made clear that the monarch’s powers were entrusted to him by the nation via its representatives.

The liberal message would have a wide appeal, most especially in urban areas. For those sectors of society not privileged by the Old Order downgrading the power of the monarchy and the removal of aristocratic and Church privileges offered a myriad of benefits, from the ability to acquire land through to participation in the political process. For this reason liberalism’s social base was rapidly to broaden. Whereas in 1808 the liberals comprised a small educated elite, during the “War of Independence” and, most especially, during the years of struggle against the absolutist restoration between 1814 and 1820, the liberal cause attracted broader sectors of the propertied elite, urban professionals, and the business community, and also gained support amongst the urban “popular classes,” comprising small-scale employers, shopkeepers, artisans, textile workers, and the like. With respect to the latter, the liberal message that all men had “natural rights” and that sovereignty should be in the hands of the nation generated great enthusiasm, though, not surprisingly, representatives of more popular strata came to the conclusion that as work was their property there should be no doubt as to their status as political citizens (Felipe Redondo 2012; Romeo Mateo 1993, 98–9).¹

The conservative turn

Yet, the reforming zeal of the “respectable” liberals, who had dominated the sessions of the Cádiz Cortes and who were largely drawn from provincial landed families, soon showed its limitations. Like their European counterparts they would, after 1814, move in a conservative direction. And after consolidating themselves in power in the mid-1830s they would use their contacts in the provinces to strengthen their links with landed elites and marginalize radical liberals. At the same time, they would make a concerted attempt to bring institutions linked to the Old Regime, most notably the Church and monarchy, on board.

The reasons behind this conservative turn were varied. They were influenced by their western European counterparts during the absolutist restorations of 1814–20 and 1820–33, when many went into exile in Britain and France (Llorens 1979; Muñoz Sempere and Alonso 2011). Moreover, they had to pay heed to European realpolitik. In Europe the defeat of Napoleon had been followed by an authoritarian-conservative reaction. Anti-liberal regimes had been established throughout central and eastern Europe. In Britain and France constitutional monarchies operated, but in both cases they only took into account the opinions of a tiny elite. Matters took a turn for the better with the French revolution of 1830 followed by the establishment of more liberal constitutions in France and Belgium. The British Reform Act followed in 1832. Yet in all these cases a powerful monarch and upper chamber were retained, and suffrage only extended to the well-to-do middle class (Pilbeam 1991; Starsinger 1991; Shroeder 1994). And throughout the early nineteenth century French and British diplomats made it clear to Spanish liberals that they saw the Cádiz Constitution as too revolutionary, most particularly because it had become something of a rallying cry for radicals in southern Europe and Latin America (Varela Suanzes 1983/4, 1995).

Most importantly, like their European counterparts the fear of the masses began to weigh in the calculations of “respectable” liberals. Their nerves were put on edge by the large numbers of poor peasants who flooded into urban Spain between the 1790s and 1830s (Castro Alfin 1990, 69–70). Much worse, with the spread of liberalism to more popular social strata during the Liberal Triennium of 1820–3 an *exaltado* liberal current emerged which used the politics of popular mobilization and the barricades to defend the Constitution of 1812. The most conservative sectors within the liberal camp were especially scathing. The French Revolution, they affirmed, had produced a democratic regime which had led to the tyranny of the masses. The *exaltado* Patriotic Societies, through their demagogic propaganda, were leading Spain down the same anarchic path and so must be suppressed (Elorza 1974, 595 and 614–17).

Subsequently, in the aftermath of the limited liberal opening which followed the death of Fernando VII in 1833, both political and now social agitation greatly intensified. Labour protest made its presence felt for the first time and in 1835 a chill ran down the spine of Barcelona’s manufacturers when the city’s most modern factory was burnt to the ground. In July 1835, and again in July 1837, the more activist sector within the “respectable” liberal camp (subsequently to be known as Progressives) saw it as necessary to lead insurrections to establish a constitutional monarchy in the teeth of opposition from the recalcitrant monarchy. In this they succeeded, using the Urban Militia and sympathetic sections of the officer corps to force the queen regent to accept liberal ministries, thereby paving the way to the Constitution of 1837 (Burdial 1998, 891–912). However, they were fearful of the consequences of this popular mobilization. Overtly republican currents had begun to make headway amongst the urban lower orders and their influence was soon felt. Anticlericalism also made its mark for the first time, with attacks on religious institutions in Madrid in 1834 and Barcelona and Zaragoza in 1835. In Valencia in September 1837 there was a revolt by more popular sectors of the Urban Militia, who along with liberal demands also called for the Militia itself to become a more democratic institution. And in the autumn of 1843 a radical uprising in Barcelona led bourgeois elites to flee the city (Burdial 1987; Fradera 2003, 59–155; Garcia Rovira 1999). As the Valencian liberal Vicente Boix confided in 1835, the liberal revolution had brought to the fore “a large number of persons who because of their lack of social status offer no guarantees of good conduct” (Burdial 1987, 192).

Finally, it was not only the left they had to fear. It was clear that supporters of the Old Order would never accept the Cádiz Constitution. And anti-liberal Catholic reactionaries – the so-called Carlists – had risen up after the death of Fernando VII in 1833 in opposition to any concessions to liberalism. They quickly showed their strength in the conservative north and east. At one point in 1837 they reached the gates of Madrid, and it was feared that the queen regent, María Cristina de Borbón-Dos Sicilias, would try to reach a compromise with them (Canal 2000, 86–119).

The conservative turn was visible in a number of spheres. The disentailment launched from 1835 was skewed towards wealthy property owners (Pérez Garzón 2007, 303–4 and 416). At the same time, more conservative liberals denounced the Constitution of Cádiz as being full of “dangerous doctrines,” “revolutionary errors,” and “democratic and dissolvent principles” (Varela Suanzes 1983/4, 100, 1995, 82). And the Constitution of 1837 created both a senate and a lower house, and gave the monarch the power to veto legislation and dissolve parliament (along with the right to choose his or her ministers, already recognized in the Cádiz Constitution). The subsequent electoral law then reduced the electorate for national elections to around five per cent of the population (Artola 1973, 197; Varela Suanzes 1983/4). This was calculated to attract men (including richer tenant farmers) who owned some property (Romero and Caballero 2006, 7–26). As for those excluded, the heroic people (*pueblo*) of the “War of Independence” were increasingly seen as the violent and dangerous *populacho* or *clases ínfimas*, who, when they protested, were portrayed as an irrational mob (*turba*). For Progressive liberals their participation in the political process had to be restricted until they had prospered and become educated, while on the conservative Moderate right it was viewed as unlikely or even undesirable that they could ever attain such status. Such an attitude was often justified in paternalist language, which could, however, be laced with condescension.²

The leading Progressive politician Salustiano de Olózaga affirmed that, as in Great Britain, the 1837 Constitution offered “all the advantages of a Republic, with the strength and stability provided by the Monarchy” (Burdíel 2008, 99). Unfortunately, it would prove very difficult to get the monarchy to adapt to a liberal constitutional framework of government. The queen regent, along with the court and the major aristocratic families and military figures who surrounded her, was to a considerable degree wedded to an absolutist conception of power. And the number of Old Regime sympathizers in what became known as the “Cristina camp” was augmented by former Carlists after the end of the civil war in 1839. In addition, a powerful monarchy was likely to strengthen the position of the most conservative liberals, who did not think the Progressives had gone far enough in restricting liberal freedoms, especially because they had reinstated universal manhood suffrage in local elections and the Urban Militia. From 1837 these conservative liberals would be referred to as the Moderates, semi-attached to which would be monarchist absolutists, who formed a ginger group which fought for as restrictive a regime as possible.

The significance of placing the monarch in a strong position soon became apparent. The Spanish monarchy and its courtly entourage had until the early 1830s tried to staunch the liberal tide. Subsequently, they realized this would no longer be possible, but throughout the 1830s attempted to ensure that the most conservative liberals held the reins of power. María Cristina was forced to renounce the regency in 1840 and went into exile. But in court circles absolutists retained a high degree of influence over the future queen, Isabel II. And when she was declared of age in the summer of 1843 (at the age of 13) they were able to

engineer the fall of the Progressive ministry and the rise to power of the Moderate general, Ramón María Narváez (Burdíel 2010, 75–119). This then opened the way to the abolition of the Urban Militia and the subordination of local authorities to much stricter control from the centre. It also made possible the approval of a new constitution in 1845, which put the election of members of the Senate in the hands of the monarchy, and the 1846 electoral law, which reduced the number of voters to around one per cent of the population (Medina Muñoz 1975, 75–105). The government affirmed that its mission was to “combat without rest the material and moral anarchy which has raised its head throughout the monarchy” (Artola 1973, 214). The *populacho* had now become the principal enemy to subdue. These events also meant that the Progressives, despite forming in the late 1830s the strongest current within the “respectable” liberal camp in urban Spain, were driven into opposition and forced to turn to their supporters in the military in order to try and recapture power.

Isabel II was able to maintain the Moderates in power for most of the period up to 1868. By the 1860s they had become a small clique, whose policies were so repressive and exclusivist that they could hardly be described as liberals at all. The queen’s ability to do this was related to the nature of the relationship established between governments and the electorate. As noted, she had at her disposal the twin powers of appointing ministers and dissolving parliament. Theoretically elections would check the monarch’s authority, but from early on governments showed great ability to control the electoral process (Varela Suanzes 1993, 110–11).

The key to governments’ power to manipulate the elections was the nexus built between political elites based in Madrid, the provincial civil governors (who were government appointees), and local “notables” (from the late nineteenth century disparagingly known as *caciques*), who were typically landowners and who in return for government favours could ensure the election of a deputy who supported the party or faction of the party which the authorities backed. The relationship was very fluid because, as noted, “respectable” liberals were often drawn from a provincial landed background, while men from wealthy provincial families who wished to build a career in the bureaucracy and politics used their connections to establish themselves in Madrid. The system, therefore, in reality perpetuated the corrupt nepotistic practices common to all Old Regime European societies, with local bourgeois and political elites paying only lip service to the classical liberal tenet that social advancement should be based on hard work and merit (Cruz 1996, 169–207). It put down roots during the reign of Isabel II (Durán de la Rúa 1979, 96–7; Romero and Caballero 2006). And, as every Spanish history textbook explains, it was refined during the Monarchist Restoration (1875–1923), with the two “official” parties, the Conservatives and Liberals, rotating in power (the so-called *turno pacífico*). When it was the opposition’s turn to take office a new prime minister would be appointed by the king. The incoming minister of the interior would then “make” the election via the civil governors using the latter’s contacts with local bigwigs. Central to this process was the acquiescence of the new official opposition, which would allow the new government to build a majority.³

This meant that propertied elites could not exercise untrammelled voting rights. Furthermore, local notables felt the weight of the central state on their backs when what it considered its vital interests, most notably the collection of taxes, were at stake (Ranzato 1987). And yet, social elites benefited from the political system in a whole host of ways. First, they could rest easy in the knowledge that “respectable” liberals would broadly defend their interests. Indeed, when radical ministries came to power between 1868 and 1873 they

mobilized behind a restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, with colonial interests in particular putting large sums at the disposal of Antonio Cánovas del Castillo and his backers (Espadas Burgos 1975). Second, local notables could directly profit from government patronage through a variety of means, from ensuring that municipal land sold at auction would end up in their hands, to influencing the distribution of local taxes, and to manipulating the election (*quinta*) of young men for military service. Such networks of favour and patronage, moreover, went beyond the political system, and were a key means through which the wealthy and powerful got their family and friends posts in major companies, the judiciary, Church, and military (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2000, 271–5).

Finally, powerful interest groups could influence government policy. A key example of this is the ability of Castilian wheat growers, with the support of Basque and Catalan industrialists, to ensure that the Conservative administration turned to protectionism in the early 1890s (Serrano Sanz 1987). Another is the power of the colonial lobby, at the heart of which were Spanish (*peninsular*) merchants and shipowners, who benefited handsomely from the colonial relationship established with Cuba. They had close friends within the political and military establishment, were able to scotch the attempt to give the colony a degree of administrative autonomy in 1893, and set up a paramilitary militia to fight the Cuban independence movement (Costa 2006, 104–5; Rodrigo y Alharilla 2000, 30–6). Francisco Romero Robledo, one of the architects of the Monarchist Restoration, and a man who had extensive interests in Cuba, was at the centre of such manoeuvres (Serrano 1984, 50). And he also provides an example of the operation of reciprocity between economic interests and political figures. The director from 1879 of the Sedó company town in Catalonia, Antonio Sedó, had since 1876 been a deputy in Romero Robledo's faction of the Conservative Party, and Romero Robledo was a shareholder in the company (Dorel-Ferré 1992, 196–204 and 273–81).

The establishment of networks of patronage was facilitated by the largely rural make-up of Spanish society. Influential figures in rural areas would be in a particularly powerful position to persuade or, if needed, cajole local inhabitants to follow their lead.⁴ Some scholars have stressed that what became known as *caciquismo* was the inevitable result of the apoliticism of much of this rural populace and the consequent lack of a solid electorate. And they have also argued that it should not necessarily be seen in a negative light because, especially during the Monarchist Restoration, it allowed political stability (Durán de la Rúa 1979, 96–7; Romero Maura 1973; Varela Ortega 1977; Varela Suanzes 1993, 114).

It was certainly the case that *caciquismo* cemented liberalism's base amongst the property-owning elite. The "respectable" political class and local notables became closely intertwined, and it was common for liberal grandees to themselves be great landowners with political influence over large territories (Dardé 2001, 565–7). As noted, it was also the case that the manipulation of elections was rooted in rural milieux still to a large degree shielded from the world of modern politics. However, it should also not be forgotten that *caciquismo* was designed to exclude radical politicians and the urban "popular classes" from the political system. This meant that its operation acted as a brake on the democratization of the country's political life (Carnero Abat 1988, 43–98; Gabriel 1985, 34–8; Vincent 2007, 72–8). And though the *turno pacífico* provided political stability until 1898, growing instability was the consequence of the Liberal Restoration's attempt to stifle the democratization of the liberal order after this date. The interests of the majority were to a large extent ignored with the result that as political options representing excluded groups grew in strength the regime would come under increasing strain. The republican and working-class left came to see the liberals

as forming part of the “oligarchy” that had to be removed from power in order to democratize the state. And left-wingers would, by and large, aim to overthrow the regime rather than reform it from within. This was particularly the case because once enmeshed within the *caciquista* web it would be extremely difficult if not impossible for “respectable” liberals to democratize the political system from above. It was in this context that from the 1890s growing numbers of the intelligentsia criticized the corrupt base of Spanish politics. The problem was the gap between corrupt practices and the liberal ideals of meritocratic social advance and free and fair elections. Moreover, this critique of the liberal elite was further exacerbated because Orientalist images of Spain as a backward land of exotic “Moorish” culture, fanatical priests, and somnolent peasants, articulated by intellectuals in the major Western powers, impacted on the psyche of the Spanish intelligentsia and the republican opposition, who claimed that liberal politicians had turned Spain into the Turkey of the West (Jarnés 1971). In sum, *caciquismo* was to become a key factor in undermining the legitimacy of the liberal order.

With respect to relations with the Church, at the Cádiz Cortes “respectable” Spanish liberals, who were themselves sincere Catholics, tried to work with the ecclesiastical authorities. Hence they maintained the confessionality of the Spanish state, with the result that religion was the one area in which freedom of thought and speech did not extend. In the heat of the subsequent conflict between liberals and absolutists the former turned on the Church and undermined its economic independence by selling vast tracts of its land on the open market, while also abolishing the male religious orders. But after establishing the liberal order in the 1830s they were determined to achieve a reconciliation. After taking power in 1843 the Moderates took the lead. They believed that the state should be able to influence the political direction of the Church. Hence, the 1851 Concordat retained the government’s power to appoint bishops (subject to ratification by the Vatican). However, they made possible the revival in fortunes of the Church by, in return for the Vatican’s acceptance of past land sales, funding the salaries of the clergy and fabric of the Church, guaranteeing the teaching of Catholic doctrine within the state education system, and allowing a limited restoration of the male religious orders. Subsequently the 1857 Moyano Law would allow the Church to build a network of private educational institutions. Just as important, from the 1850s liberal politicians would (unlike their early-nineteenth-century predecessors) interfere little in the internal workings of the Church (Alonso 2014, 184–213; Callahan 1984, 191–2; Suárez Cortina 2014, 33–72).

Liberals hoped that the clergy would play a positive role in securing support for the new state, in a context in which the pulpit remained the primary source of information for Spain’s predominantly rural population. In addition, they believed that the Church could take the lead in restoring social harmony, most particularly after the violent political and social conflicts of the years 1820–3 and 1835–43.⁵ One has to remember in this respect that the Church had, at least theoretically, played a crucial role in maintaining social stability under the Old Regime. It had justified inequality as divinely ordained, and one of its main functions had been to provide charity to the poor, who in return were meant to show deference and not challenge the status quo (Callahan 1984, 48–50). In an age before new mechanisms designed to stabilize capitalism had been put in place it is not surprising that liberals should hope that the Church could once again take on this task. Thus, although the state put major charitable organizations previously run by the Church (hospitals, hospices, and the like) in the hands of the provincial authorities and set up a system of state education, it was happy for

the Church hierarchy to participate in their operation, for (largely female) religious orders to play the lead role in caring for and educating the sick and needy, and for schools to employ nuns to teach religious doctrine. At the same time, as indicated, it had no problem with the Church setting up its own charitable organizations and schools (Casa Soto 1989; Castro Alfin 1990; Esteban de la Vega 1992).

Elites also adapted the tradition of Christian paternalism and charity to their own ends. Given that the Church had lost much of its land, its primary source of income, its role in doling out charity was restricted. And along with the state propertied elites stepped into the breach, both helping to finance and operate state-run and private charitable organizations. In the latter case, an important role was frequently taken by bourgeois and aristocratic “ladies,” who could thereby play a limited role within the public sphere while not competing in the world of work. Such elites thereby presented themselves as the new benefactors of the poor, who like the aristocracy under the Old Order could also expect obedience and deference in return. Throughout they would work in close collaboration with the Church itself, which they also regaled with gifts and donations. In establishing this close relationship they had in their favour the Church’s ingrained respect for social hierarchy and its need for financial support.

From the 1840s, in the context of growing social strife, such charitable work became linked to the goal of “moralizing” the lower orders. The medical profession took the lead in arguing that industrialization and urbanization had led to both the physical and moral degradation of the urban poor and that measures had to be taken to remedy this. Furthermore, they saw moral turpitude as leading to social and political radicalization. Such arguments were rooted in the Enlightenment idea that the idle and depraved had to be reformed, and were another example of the way in which the lower classes were being categorized as a perverse threat to the social order. However, exposure of the poor to Catholic doctrine was seen as a key element in turning them into hard-working, upstanding, and deferent subjects (Casa Soto 1989). This was clearly expressed by the Progressive liberal physician, Felip Monlau, who advocated a whole series of measures the state and educated elites should take to improve the conditions in which workers lived. Amongst these was the opening of Sunday schools to teach Christian doctrine, given that: “Compliance with the precepts of the Church and the practice of devotion powerfully influences the morality of the worker, improving his customs” (Monlau and Salarich 1984, 102).

In the late nineteenth century large businesses in areas like textiles and mining also built company towns; their owners adopted paternalist-cum-disciplinarian regimes, tried to present themselves as benefactors to their “industrial family,” ensured workers attended mass, and handed over education in these towns to the Church (Sierra Álvarez 1990). In addition, a number of large-scale industrialists began to promote Catholic unions. This strategy was spearheaded by the shipping magnate, Claudio López Bru, the second Marquis of Comillas, who set up a National Council of Catholic Workers’ Corporations in 1894 (Lannon 1987, 146–69; Winston 1985, 38–64). Finally, elites also utilized the trappings of the Old Order to consolidate new capitalist hierarchies. They adopted the pose of cultured and munificent gentlemen and, in general, eagerly accepted noble titles offered by the Crown. A cultured and beneficent façade and an aristocratic title, they hoped, would further consolidate social deference and hence their privileged status (Cruz 1996; Smith forthcoming).

The reconciliation with the Church had further ideological and cultural repercussions. From 1875 the religious orders were allowed to grow and prosper, and their private schools

largely monopolized the education of the well-to-do. At the same time, the Church's cultural activities became more intense, and the Catholic press grew rapidly in strength (Montero 1993). Furthermore, the iconography of the regime became suffused in religious imagery. Never was this more clearly expressed than in 1919, when Alfonso XIII and his ministers consecrated the nation to the Sacred Heart at the statue erected at the Cero de los Ángeles south of Madrid (Lannon 1987, 31–4). The shift was given ideological cover by a new generation of more conservative liberal academics. If the first generation of liberals had viewed medieval and early-modern Spanish history as comprising a struggle between the people in defence of their “liberties” against the centralizing Habsburg and Bourbon monarchies, from the 1850s in particular the conservative liberal narrative focused attention on the role of the monarchy and the Catholic Church in the rise of Spain to the status of major world power and empire (Álvarez Junco 2001, 224; Boyd 1997, 71–86; Cirujano, Planes, and Garzón 1985). In sum, over a whole series of fields the state had begun to work closely with the Church, and emphasize Spain's Christian, Catholic values.⁶

The big problem with respect to the compromise was that while much of the hierarchy of the Church was willing to work with conservative liberalism, most of the rank-and-file were reactionaries, who still hankered after a clerical, anti-liberal, regime. Hence, to a degree at least, liberalism had entrusted its ideological legitimacy to an institution which had little or no faith in parliamentary government. Moreover, this rapprochement intensified left-wing hostility towards the conservative regime built under the auspices of Isabel II between 1844 and 1868, and, subsequently, to the Monarchist Restoration. Indeed, because radicals and socialists tended to see History as representing a titanic clash between the Church, which was keeping Spain in the Dark Ages, and the “progressive” forces who were struggling to modernize Spain and free it from the Church's “obscurantist” grip, they exaggerated its power and influence. And as a result, left-wing republicans and anarchists came to believe that by destroying the fabric of the Church they could undermine the Restoration regime (Álvarez Junco 2002; Cueva Merino 1997, 101–26; Revuelta González 1991, 213–34; Smith 2007a, 150–82; Sanabria 2009).

The decline and fall of “respectable” Spanish liberalism

The liberal-conservative architects of the Monarchist Restoration proved more flexible than their Moderate predecessors. After defeating efforts to establish a more democratic liberal regime between 1868 and 1873, they realized that they could not simply turn the clock back. Under Antonio Cánovas del Castillo they forged a regime which by making some political concessions was able to bring those liberals previously identified with the Progressives on board. Thus the 1876 Constitution while maintaining the powers of the monarch intact enshrined Spaniards' civil liberties (to be regulated by future laws) and allowed the private worship of religions other than Catholicism. And in the 1880s the Liberal Party (to a significant degree comprising men drawn from the Progressives) went much further, approving legislation that regulated civil liberties and, in 1890, introducing universal manhood suffrage. This occurred in a context in which within much of western Europe, under pressure from more popular political forces, liberals increasingly dropped their insistence that voting rights had to be based on “capacity” (Stone 1983, 60–6). However, the problem was that the *caciquista* political system continued to operate, with the unedifying spectacle of the Liberals colluding in the bastardization of their own legislation. From the 1900s the leading

Conservative politician, Antonio Maura, talked of the need to break the hold of the *caciques* over the localities and base the regime on the middle classes. Yet little was to come of his efforts (Romero Salvadó 2012, 1–26). It has been argued that in 1923 the regime was finally making a serious effort to open up to new political forces on the moderate centre-left. Whether one believes this or not, events were to show that it was too little too late.⁷

The major problem was that the “respectable” liberals were elitists who found it hard if not impossible to embrace mass politics. All the revolutionary élan present in the elaboration of the Cádiz Constitution had been lost. The regime’s “official” parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, comprised a number of factions, each led by a major political figure. At local level social elites affiliated to these parties, but they had no mass base. Furthermore, they were comfortable in a world in which the rotation of power was decided upon in discussions with the monarch and in small conclaves. And, as discussed, the electoral process itself consisted of negotiations between the minister of the interior, the provincial civil governor, and local bigwigs. There was no question of actually going out into the constituencies and campaigning in order to win seats (Moreno Luzón 1998).

This left the liberals vulnerable to attack on all sides. After the defeat in the war of 1898 and loss of Spain’s remaining colonies in the Atlantic and Pacific the cry for “regeneration” went up, and it was the political system which found itself in the firing line. As noted, sectors of the intelligentsia had already developed the argument that the corrupt political class was an important factor in Spain’s supposed failure to modernize, and in the aftermath of what was seen as a national humiliation the critique was much amplified. There was a good deal of introspection amongst Spanish intellectuals as to whether the incapacity or degeneration of the Spanish race was part of the problem. Nevertheless, few doubted the regime bore at least part of the responsibility. Joaquín Costa led the way, fuming against the “oligarchy,” who through its *caciquista* practices had lain Spain low (Álvarez Junco 1998, 448–69; Balfour 1997, 64–131).

On the left similar perspectives had also been elaborated. And from the 1880s the left became increasingly important. Labour unions were able to launch bursts of strike action in 1881–5, 1890–3, and 1900–3. The years between 1916 and 1923 then saw an explosion of social protest, with labour unions mobilizing vast numbers of workers in Spain’s urban centres and peasants in southern Spain. In addition, from the 1900s republicans won growing numbers of seats in urban areas (Álvarez Junco 2002; Martin 1990; Smith 2007a). The regime was also under fire from the forces of the right. As seen, liberals already faced the opposition of the bulk of the clergy. The Church rank-and-file constantly attacked the liberal political order, putting forward the argument that as liberal regimes had defied the word of God, the political world was inevitably marked by corruption, greed, ambition, and vanity, and that the result would be anarchy and chaos (Vigil Gallego 1975). At the same time, Carlists and the Catholic Integrist party elaborated blueprints for a corporatist political system, inspired by an idealized vision of pre-absolutist medieval Europe but adapted to modern times (Blinkhorn 1972, 16–24; López-Cordón Cortejo 1985, 71–109).

From the late nineteenth century right-wing criticism of the regime broadened and intensified. Catalonia was the most industrialized part of Spain and the Catalan business elite had both developed a close rapport with the Church and felt alienated from the central state. This explains why elements within the business community began to make the distinction between the “productive classes” and parasitic political class, and suggested that representation to parliament should be based on corporatist lines. And faced by growing labour

agitation, business became interested in the Catholic argument that as part of a corporatist political system the guilds could be reconstituted, in the process doing away with independent labour unions (Bengoechea 1994; Bravo and Palomas 1992, 259–64). From the 1900s in particular, army officers also joined clerical ideologues in voicing concerns that the liberal authorities were not doing enough to curb the rise of godless anarchist and socialist agitators, and ensure the maintenance of social order. Especially important in strengthening such views would be the week-long anticlerical riots in Barcelona during July 1909 known as Tragic Week (Boyd 1979, 21; Callahan 2000, 80–1). Indeed, the drift to the right of much of the officer corps, which was resentful that it had taken part of the blame for the “Disaster” of 1898, believed it had a duty to defend the motherland against subversion, and assimilated the regenerationist critique of the regime, was a major feature of the period 1899–1923 (Balfour 1997, 164–87; Boyd 1979).

These attacks on the Monarchist Restoration came to a head from 1916. First, in 1917 the regime’s undemocratic foundations encouraged the Catalan regionalist-cum-nationalist party, the Lliga Regionalista, to spearhead a movement for democratic reform. Then, from early 1919, the rise of labour agitation, at its zenith in Barcelona and in the Andalusian countryside, produced a right-wing backlash. To make matters worse, at Annual in Morocco Spanish forces suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of local tribesmen in July 1921, leaving 8000 dead. And in these circumstances the social base of the Restoration regime narrowed even further. Up until 1919, even though there was criticism from right-wing circles, over much of Spain the propertied elite had worked with the regime. Only in Catalonia, it seems, had there been significant dissent. It was seen as providing relative stability in the face of more revolutionary forces to its left. Now, however, in other areas doubts began to emerge as to whether it was up to the task (Gómez Ochoa 1993, 269–71). Furthermore, such concerns were shared by King Alfonso XIII. In the 1900s he had tried to portray himself as a relatively liberal, modernizing monarch. But the revolutionary convulsions in Central and Eastern Europe between 1917 and 1919, along with social and political unrest in Spain, led him to fear for his Crown. And as a result he began to contemplate authoritarian solutions to the crisis of the regime (Moreno Luzón 2003, 151–86).

Sectors of the regime looked to accommodate right-wing criticism. Antonio Maura played a key role in ensuring that General Severiano Martínez Anido was able to act as the virtual military dictator of Barcelona between November 1920 and October 1922. But most of the political establishment tried to operate within a liberal political framework and maintain the rule of law. In this respect it was probably the decision of both Conservative and Liberal governments from October 1922 to adopt a more centrist course, sacking Martínez Anido, restoring constitutional guarantees throughout Spain, and trying to work with more moderate elements within the anarchist-syndicalist labour confederation, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), which sealed the regime’s fate.

It was particularly vulnerable to attack from the right because the oft-repeated argument that it comprised a small oligarchy of corrupt politicians only interested in personal gain had gained such wide currency. This meant that neither Spain’s intelligentsia nor the forces of the left would come to its defence. As the leader of the Lliga Regionalista, Francesc Cambó, presciently observed: “The prestige of parliament has fallen so low,” that if it were “dissolved by the boot of a military man or by the whip of a dictator no one would be sorry” (Cambó 1923, 2). This is what came to pass. Miguel Primo de Rivera, who was captain general of Barcelona from March 1922, was above all concerned at the level of social conflict and the

supposed threat posed by the revolutionary left (Smith 2007b, 25–30). It was a view that was widely shared by business and propertied elites, the conservative middle classes, army officers, and the Church. Anger within the officer corps was further exacerbated because politicians were seen as not giving the army the wherewithal to fight the Moroccan campaign effectively and as trying to pass the blame for the defeat of Annual onto its shoulders (La Porte 2001, 2010, 230–54). Hence, when Primo de Rivera launched his coup from Barcelona on 13 September 1923 no one lifted a finger in defence of the regime. And government ministers quickly disappeared from view. Several days later a beaming Alfonso XIII was pictured outside his Madrid palace greeting the man he would subsequently call “my Mussolini” (Borrás Betriu 1997, 98–9). And so passed away close on 100 years of “respectable” liberal rule in Spain.

Conclusions

Spanish liberalism was not unique. Throughout continental Europe the liberals’ early radicalism soon dissipated and they came to support constitutional monarchies that undermined the economic and social foundations of the Old Order, but which would to a greater or lesser degree align with the small propertied elite and incorporate institutions and personnel drawn from the continent’s absolutist past.⁸ Hence, liberalism was Janus-faced. On the one hand, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was revolutionary in terms of both language and intent, but where liberals subsequently had at least a hand on the tiller of power they paid particular attention to building a new liberal state and seeing off radical reforming or revolutionary threats to their left. Theorists of nationalism have, in this respect, noted that in the mid-nineteenth century the revolutionary liberal nationalist discourse, with its emphasis on the fight to achieve “national sovereignty,” gave way to a more conservative nationalist narrative focused on achieving loyalty to the state (Anderson 1991, 83–107; Hobsbawm 1990, 41–4). And it was for these reasons that although efforts were made to broaden the base of liberal regimes (or regimes in which liberalism was an important component) from the 1860s, the liberal authorities were in much of continental Europe seen as elitists out of touch with the majority of the population. This was the key component of the crisis of liberalism from the late nineteenth century, and made liberal regimes vulnerable to authoritarian right-wing take-overs in the aftermath of the First World War.⁹

“Respectable” Spanish liberalism should be seen in this context. Nevertheless, in the Spanish case the undemocratic implications of allying with the monarchy and Church were particularly clear. And the continued operation of *caciquismo* throughout our period provides a striking example of the way in which liberal-dominated regimes could retreat into a self-enclosed bubble. This took place after a remarkable revolutionary phase between 1835 and 1837, when Spanish liberals were able to force through a thoroughgoing economic and political transformation of the country in the teeth of opposition from the Old Order. Thereafter, the distinction between the need to provide basic civil liberties to all the population, but only give political rights to the educated, property-owning classes, was a key element paving the way from revolutionary to conservative liberalism. And it was the establishment of the *caciquista* nexus between the liberal political class and local propertied elites that did most in the long run to undermine the credibility of the liberal state. From the late nineteenth century the political establishment was increasingly seen by Spain’s most influential intellectuals and the broader intelligentsia, by radical and left-wing activists, and by

growing sectors of the right, as corrupt and degenerate, and as doing the bidding of the “oligarchy.”

With respect to the monarchy and Church, Spanish liberals saw the need to bring these institutions on board, believing that they would adapt and play a positive role in building the new state. Hence, one can argue that they attempted to pour old wine into new bottles, adapting what they saw as tried and tested formulae to achieve social and political stability. And as a result, within the liberal political shell groups whose power derived from their status under the Old Regime, and which showed limited willingness to adapt to the new liberal order, remained very much alive. Social elites, including much of the professional middle class, also utilized charity and Old Regime markers of status in order to buttress new capitalist hierarchies and achieve deference from the lower orders. The argument that the supposedly violent, drunken, and lascivious (and somehow, as a result, politically radicalized) urban lower orders had to be “moralized” was rooted in the Enlightenment concern to reform those elements in society who did not conform to established social norms. But the Catholic Church, which doctrinally was still rooted in the Counter Reformation, became the major vehicle for this “moralization.”

The rise of the left after 1900 showed that in these efforts the liberals had patently failed. In addition, liberal policies had served to consolidate powerful institutions that would not necessarily march to the liberal tune. Much of the Church grass-roots spurned reconciliation and (with the exception of Amadeo I between 1870 and 1873 and Alfonso XII in the first years of the Monarchist Restoration) monarchs maintained a taste for power. And in 1923 neither institution would prove a friend of liberalism. With the regime also losing the support of the officer corps and social elites it then found it had no one to turn to. The ground was cut from under the liberals’ feet and no one was there to cushion the fall. As indicated, the fate of Spanish “respectable” liberalism was not unique. In much of continental Europe, the post-1918 authoritarian putsches showed that liberals would have to fully embrace democracy in order to build more stable regimes which enjoyed a much broader degree of political support.¹⁰ Even so, as recent experience in Spain and elsewhere has shown us, the danger of political corruption and the development of unhealthy close relationships between politicians and powerful lobbies still has the potential to erode political legitimacy if the legal system and democratic institutions are insufficiently robust.

Notes

1. Historians usually make the distinction between the governmental or respectable liberals, who were elitists and favoured a property franchise (at least until the lower orders became more educated and prosperous), and “radicals” or “popular liberals,” who backed universal manhood suffrage. For use of the former term see Gildea (1987), 75–9, and Broers (1996), 67–9; for use of the latter Thomson (2009).
2. The Moderate liberal, Andrés Borrego, provides an example of this condescending paternalism. He believed that “the true guarantee of representative government consists of putting political power in the hands of taxpayers and the enlightened classes, which they should use to benefit, and in the interest of, the ignorant and helpless majority” (Castro Alfín 1990, 89). Moderate views that the poor and ignorant would always remain thus were frequently expressed. One such politician affirmed in the Spanish Cortes in 1845 that “poverty was a sign of stupidity”, while Juan Bravo Murillo, the Spanish prime minister no less, exclaimed in 1851 that “we need not men who think but oxen that work” (Carr 1966, 237; Sebastián and Fuentes 2002, 260).

3. There has been considerable debate regarding the operation of the liberal political system. In the 1960s and 1970s Marxist historians, most notably Manuel Tuñón de Lara, argued that the nineteenth century saw the rise of an oligarchic power bloc, which was dominated by the agrarian elite (Tuñón de Lara 1973). A rival group of historians affirmed that the politicians of the Monarchist Restoration maintained themselves in power by co-opting local figures into the state administration, and that one could not therefore argue that there was a close link between the political system and propertied elites (Romero Maura 1973, 15–44; Tusell 1976; Varela Ortega 1977). These latter works remain important in order to understand how the political elite operated. However, while more recent studies focused on local elites would not see Madrid-based politicians as simply dancing to the tune of such elites, they have reasserted the close links between these elites and the Madrid-based political establishment (Moreno Luzón 2007, 417–41). With respect to more recent bibliography, very important are studies that analyse in depth the operation of *caciquismo* at a local level, while also making the connection with national politics. See, for example, Cruz Artacho (1994), Milán (1997), and Rubí i Casals (2005). In addition, Cruz (1996) provides a stimulating analysis of the social and cultural roots of liberal politics. I would, however, stress the fact politicians maintained a significant level of autonomy and, in particular, had to a large degree to operate within a liberal political framework. As we shall see, this is important when we come to consider “respectable” liberalism’s demise.
4. Historians have pointed out that it was not only in rural areas that *caciquismo* operated. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the general argument that it was the largely rural make-up of Spain that was the key to the system’s operation. Once universal manhood suffrage was established from 1890 it was in the major urban centres that it proved easiest to break the *caciques’* hold. For example in late-nineteenth-century Vizcaya business elites found it more difficult – though not impossible – to manipulate elections in Bilbao (Corcuera Atienza 2001, 115 and 265–76).
5. This was common to the Catholic world. After signing the 1801 Concordat with the Vatican a sceptical Napoleon commented: “In religion I do not see the mystery of the Incarnation but the mystery of the social order” (Gildea 1987, 36).
6. Milán and Cruz Romeo (2004) have argued that the liberal revolution of the 1830s saw a decisive break with the Old Order and a radical transformation of Spanish society. The fact the liberals wrestled away the absolutists’ grip on power was certainly important. This can be seen when one compares Spain with Germany. In most of the pre-unification German states and in the post-unification united Germany authoritarian-conservatives largely retained their hands on the levers of power down to the Weimar Republic (Kocka 1998). And yet Milán and Cruz Romeo fail to address the fact that Spanish liberals then compacted with institutions drawn from the Old Regime, adapted corrupt practices typical of the Old Order, and utilized elements of Old Regime-inspired cultural practices to their own ends. In this respect the difference between Spain and Germany was one of degree. Indeed, the German political and bureaucratic elite were able to modernize the state in a way that their Spanish counterparts were never able to match.
7. The argument whether in 1923 the regime was finally opening up is a long-running one. The most detailed critique is to be found in Francisco J. Romero Salvadó (2010). More favourable to the position that given more time the liberals could have reformed the system from within is Javier Moreno Luzón (2012).
8. On the continued significance of institutions and cultural attitudes whose roots are to be found in the Old Regime the major work is still Arno J. Mayer (1981). However, in this case study I have not followed Mayer’s argument that “the bourgeoisie” sold out to the Old Order and was ensnared by aristocratic values. Rather, I see the liberals as trying to build alliances and adopting aspects of Old Regime culture and practice in what they perceived as their own interests.
9. However, where more radical liberals achieved a greater weight in government things played out very differently. This was the case in France following the establishment of the Third Republic (1870–1914), with the result that the French Republic built up a far stronger social base than the Spanish Restoration Monarchy.
10. It can be argued that the Nazi’s rise to power in 1933 had rather different roots, but this is of course not the place to pursue this question.

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