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**Teofilo F. Ruiz.** *Spanish Society, 1400-1600.* Social History of Europe Series. London: Longman, 2001. xv + 286 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-28692-4.

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## More Than Just Social History

### More Than Just Social History

This book is deceptive. It is a book about the society of early modern Spain, or, more accurately, as author Teofilo Ruiz notes, the “Spains.” But it is far richer than most social histories. It looks like a textbook, and it certainly could function as such for a graduate seminar on social and economic history. But it is more than a synthesis of existing scholarship. Ruiz, professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles, makes an important argument for historians, and not just Hispanists, about the nature, sources, and practice of social and cultural history. His sophisticated understanding of social, literary, and cultural theories, and the depth and range of his knowledge of political history permit him to argue convincingly for a richer understanding of the complex interactions of society, politics, and culture in one of the most vital and misunderstood regions of early modern Europe. For scholars well-versed in current trends in cultural history, his method is not unfamiliar, but it is handled with such skill and narrative grace that it is convincing and compelling. Ruiz very carefully commingles pioneering work from the 1960s by Jaime Vicens Vives that relied on demography, prosopography, economics, and class with more recent methods and sources of cultural history. He owes, and acknowledges, his debt to materialist and structuralist theories of Fernand Braudel, Jacques LeGoff’s notion of *mentalites*, Victor Turner’s work on semiotics, new historicist literary analysis, and Mikhail Bakhtin on the carnival and performance. In less skilled hands, the result could be more of a pastiche than a coherent argument, but Ruiz astutely does not let the-

ory control his thesis.

And his thesis is important. He makes two points: first, that the social distance between those above and those below increased during the transition from Middle Ages to early modern period and, in turn, the ways of signaling this difference changed. He notes that although some forms of display (such as royal entries in Valladolid in 1428 and the Zaragoza festival of 1585) looked the same in some respects, he detects a shift from participatory (in which all ranks joined in) to a spectator sport (“gaze,” p. 148). Second, he notes the formation of “community” across social boundaries: communities subject to king, community of Christians, community of Castilians and Spaniards. He stresses that the fluidity of social categories created room for some social mobility and new ways to circumvent social barriers. Social groups did not change social status but individuals did (“crossing over”). Ruiz detects a dialectic between nominally rigid social norms and the complex ambiguities of everyday life, and a tension between the structure and the practice, an insight that echoes the work of Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu. The society that Ruiz describes is not the static, unyielding, censorious Spain of the “black legend” and the Counter-Reformation familiar to many non-Hispanists, but rather one in which individuals negotiated daily for small social advantages for themselves and their kin. His thesis runs counter to the prejudices many scholars still have when it comes to Spain, making this book essential reading for anyone interested in early modern Europe.

Ruiz begins by questioning the traditional periodization of Spanish early modern history that is bounded by the Columbian voyages of 1492 and ends with the death of Charles II in 1700, emphasizing instead a long, progressive transformation from the mid-fourteenth century to the later seventeenth century. In this, Ruiz's interpretation differs substantially from that of James Casey, whose recent book *Early Modern Spain: A Social History* (1999) is a more traditional interpretation of early modern history that deals primarily with the seventeenth century. Ruiz pays close attention to the distinctions and commonality, unity and separateness, commingling and segregation of the various social, occupational, and political groups within what we now consider Spain. He is aware of the permeability of class boundaries but at the same time, he is sensitive to the profoundly influential realities of power and hegemony. It is this blending of the social, political, and cultural that marks this book as a distinctive and important addition to the historiography of pre-modern Spain. In the end, he sees Spanish society in a broad sense as unchanging, but in a microscopic or local sense, it was infinitely subtle and variable.

The fingerprint of Braudel is especially evident in the first two parts on geography, politics, and social structures, especially in his organization of his thesis as a series of problems in chronological order: conquest and settlement of New World, the establishment of the Habsburg dynasty, internal political organization of the Empire, and rebellion of the Alpujarras. Ruiz then takes up questions of social orders ("those who have, those who have not") in a nuanced account that considers land ownership or type of labor (he constructs a "typology" of peasants) as the key determinants of social rank. But I wonder about his use of the data from the 1792 census for describing social patterns in 1400 or 1600. Are peasants really so "timeless"? Ruiz wants both "dramatic change" and the timelessness of the structures, but this particular source seems problematic and the source itself needs a closer examination in this context to put to rest any hesitations about its usefulness. He is on far surer ground in his discussion of those on the margins of society (because of religion, ethnicity, or occupation), and his examination of the role of migration and urban-rural relationships is particularly good. His discussion of the relations among the many religious groups in Spain is informed by post-colonial theories on self and other, and his discussion of the gypsies fills a much-needed gap in the literature.

Just in case you weren't paying close attention, part 3, "Structures of Everyday Life," owes an even greater debt to Braudel. This long section is the heart of the book and

it reflects his own scholarship on late medieval Castile. His range of topics reads like a primer on cultural history: festivals as sites of inclusion and exclusion, festivals as an affirmation of power, the binding of social groups, city and countryside, the public and the private, and the persistent problem of violence in all its guises. This is not, however, a reiteration of Bakhtin and Turner, nor is it Natalie Zemon Davis and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie with a Spanish accent. Ruiz makes the important point that the nature of monarchical power was different after 1500 and since festivals reflected power, they changed accordingly. The power of the church seems, at times, to be foremost in this equation, although in chapter 6 he argues that church and crown were closely allied and that the two were conflated with respect to festivals. This section is the strongest part of the book because it is the product of his own impressive archival work. Using a number of detailed case studies, he examines the ordinary and extraordinary violence of life in the stories of peasant conflict in Ribafrecha and Leza, religious violence against Moriscos (in the case of Pina and the attacks by Lupercio Latras in 1588), "everyday" violence (public executions, jousts, and tournaments), civil strife, nobles as perpetrators of some of the worst civil strife (in Ribagorza, Urgel, and Valencia), and literary representations of peasant unrest. He is attuned to the complexities of culture, as is evident in his discussion of religious festivals, which he sees as both festivals of affirmation (displays of regal power and royal entries), affirmations of faith, and expressions of exclusion (Inquisition trials and autos-de-fe). He makes the point that Corpus Christi united Christians while autos-de-fe and the Inquisition both united and separated them; however, above all, these festivals served to define the cultural and religious parameters of the community.

His interpretation of violence is influenced by David Nirenberg's provocative book, *Communities of Violence* (1996). Informed by the breadth and depth of his knowledge of the political history of the age, Ruiz sees violence as a form of social negotiation (albeit a rather extreme one), a means of communicating power, and a political and social discourse, rather than as simply the result of inevitable class tensions or unfettered political ambitions. His analyses of rebellions such as the *remença* peasants in Aragon (1472-86), the *Irmandinos* in Galicia, *hermandades* (1420s, 1430s, 1467-69), the *comuneros* in Castile (1520-21) and *Germanias* in Valencia (1519), the Aragonese revolt of 1591-92, and large-scale unrest in 1640 are subtle, complex, and insightful. He concludes the second section with an examination of eating and dressing (influenced by Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Pro-*

cess) and religion, honor, sexuality, and popular culture by describing the “deployment of highly ornate codes of conduct, dress, and diet” (p. 253) as markers of status and religion and thus indicators of social adhesion and/or segregation. In conclusion, he follows Don Quixote and Sancho Panza around Spain in an eloquent and vivid evocation of the society and culture of Golden Age Spain and the “mentalities of everyday life.”

As strong as the book is, it does have one troubling weak spot. Ruiz’s analysis of gender relations is surprisingly brief and theoretically thin, especially given his recent essay, “Women, Work and Daily Life in Late Medieval Castile”.<sup>[1]</sup> In particular, given his emphasis on landholding, I was left wondering about the impact of inheritance practices on women, their legal rights, their occupations, and their economic contributions. Women, while certainly present individually as saints and queens, are rarely accorded the same careful scrutiny as a group that one would expect. Ruiz mentions gender differences, but does not analyze them as carefully as he does class and religious differences. He notes (in chapter 8) that rape was a serious problem and he mentions issues of honor and shame (but why not cite Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger?*), but he missed an opportunity to use this issue in order to examine the ways in which gender is deeply imbedded in the legal, political, economic, social, and cultural practices of everyday life. His discussion of carnival and cross-dressing does not take into account recent queer theory and gender-inversion theories, and as a result he makes such practices seem rather tame and frivolous, when in fact they were highly coded

ways of expressing class and gender anxieties in a patriarchal culture. The neglect of feminist theory to complement his erudition in the fields of cultural, social, and economic theory is a serious omission, and as a result he missed some important works in the secondary literature on women. For example, he notes that Valencia became a “city of ‘widows’” in the early modern period (p. 65) but sadly this issue is not explored further. Where, for example, is Louise Mirrer’s study of widows, *Upon My Husband’s Death* (1992)? What of recent work on Spanish women by Ronald Surtz, Milagros Rivera, and Maria Echaniz Sans, among others?

These issues notwithstanding, this book, with its careful linkage of high politics and social trends, the blending of cultural theory and symbols and rituals, is an important contribution to the social history of Europe. It is a welcome addition to an ever-growing bibliography of works on late medieval and early modern Spanish history by demonstrating the richness, the distinctiveness, and the importance of Spanish culture in an age of Spanish political dominance in Europe and the Americas. And last, but certainly not least, it underscores why social and cultural historians need to be well-versed in political history, and why political historians cannot neglect the attitudes and culture of the masses as they study the deeds of the elites.

#### Note

[1]. In *Women at Work in Spain from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Times*, ed. Marilyn Stone and Carmen Benito-Vessels (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

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