



The Decline of Spain: A Historical Myth?: A Rejoinder

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A REJOINER

JONATHAN ISRAEL CLAIMS THAT MY ARGUMENTS ABOUT SPANISH DECLINE “mostly fail to stand up to scrutiny”.¹ I originally spoke of a “myth” of decline in two principal senses. First, there was the attempt by historians from the time of Sempere y Guarinos and Cánovas, helped powerfully by Hamilton and other modern scholars, to locate in national history an epoch of total economic collapse that occupied the whole period from the end (or even the beginning) of the reign of Philip II up to the nineteenth century. Israel now concedes that this view was untenable. “A growing body of opinion”, he writes, “discerns the beginning of decline during the early years of the reign of Philip III and completion of the process during the middle decades of the seventeenth century”.² This is welcome support for my view³ that the recession in Spain was probably centred between the 1590s and the 1650s. The second sense in which I spoke of a myth was the arbitrary use of incomplete evidence — examples I discussed were the ritual abuse of the Mesta by all historians, and the identification of decline with the convenient data for bullion imports given by Hamilton — to suggest that Spain was once rich and powerful and fell thereafter into protracted decay. Israel significantly does not try to reinstate the traditional views on the Mesta and on bullion.

Since these major contentions seem to stand up to scrutiny, it remains to see what incidental difficulties arise from my article. Israel writes that I fly “directly in the face of the evidence” by claiming that the *arbitristas* located Spain’s golden age “in the time of Ferdinand and Isabella”.⁴ My references speak plainly for themselves;⁵ more could be added. I need only cite as further support the recent editor of Sancho de Moncada, commenting on the *arbitristas* of the “school of Toledo” to which Moncada belonged: “in many of them we see a nostalgia for Spain as it was before 1492, free of the economic oppression of Flanders, of Italy, of America”.⁶

Israel also insists that the *arbitristas* were “intensely and principally occupied” with ruin and decay in their country, though they may not have used the word “decline” often.⁷ I have never denied their con-

¹ See p. 170 above.

² See p. 180 above.

³ The only researched work in English to coincide roughly with my view is the fine study by James Casey, *The Kingdom of Valencia in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979).

⁴ See p. 171 above.

⁵ From Fernández Navarrete, Cellorigo and Martínez de Mata: see my “The Decline of Spain: A Historical Myth”, *Past and Present*, no. 81 (Nov. 1978), p. 28.

⁶ Sancho de Moncada, *Restauración política de España* (Madrid, 1619), ed. Jean Vilar Berrogain (Madrid, 1974), p. 58.

⁷ See p. 171 above.

cern, and have quoted their views often enough elsewhere. But their analyses go beyond any preoccupation with so-called decline. Though fully aware of recent and current disasters, they looked beyond these in search of the *único remedio*,⁸ the "sole remedy" that would undo the wrong turning Spain had once taken, or (in Moncada's words) heal the "wound" originally suffered by Spain.⁹ They knew that something was wrong, but were never men of despair, obsessed with the pessimism that afflicted more practical men; they were men of hope, convinced that they had a solution. To that end they were quite willing to overstate their case shamelessly. It would be a rash historian who accepted their claims without trying to verify the facts from other sources.¹⁰

Israel spends several pages arguing that there was a "rise" of Spain's economy, that the manufacturing interest was "a force to be reckoned with", and that decay followed this period of prosperity.¹¹ The reader is liable to become confused here, for there is no fundamental disagreement between Israel and myself. Nobody has ever questioned that sectors of Spain's textile, shipping and other industries expanded during the sixteenth century. Where we differ (and there is ample room for honest disagreement, since we still know so little about Spain's sixteenth-century economy) is about the context. Israel writes of "bustling industrial life . . . rising demand . . . the textile industries continued to expand until the 1590s".¹² He is attempting, in other words, to portray a "rise". The reality is that there was indeed a significant expansion, but it was stunted and never reached the stage of "take-off". From 1576, when Spanish industrial exports to Italy declined to only two-thirds the value of goods imported from Italy,¹³ an unfavourable trade balance affected the once healthy Mediterranean outlets. This reflected the domestic crisis: far from the "industries" expanding, as Israel erroneously claims, the *only* textile centre to survive into the 1590s was Segovia, as Felipe Ruiz Martín has clearly shown.¹⁴ Before the argument is dismissed as my own peculiar view, I offer the opinion of a French authority: "let there be no mistake: Segovia was an exception. Before the end of the century, its activity likewise showed signs of stagnation. In general, Spanish textiles were hard put to struggle against foreign

⁸ Cf. Jean Vilar Berrogain, *Literatura y economía: la figura satírica del arbitrista en el Siglo de Oro* (Madrid, 1973), p. 141.

⁹ Moncada, *Restauración política de España*, ed. Vilar, p. 67.

¹⁰ The small credence given to some *arbitristas* even in their own day is discussed by Vilar, *Literatura y economía*, pp. 140-7.

¹¹ See pp. 173-9 above.

¹² See p. 173 above.

¹³ There were 800,000 ducats worth exported to Italy, against 1,200,000 ducats in imports: Felipe Ruiz Martín, *Lettres marchandes échangées entre Florence et Medina del Campo* (Paris, 1965), p. cxxxii.

¹⁴ I pointed this out when citing Ruiz Martín's study in my "The Decline of Spain", p. 47 n.108.

competition. How do we explain the industrial backwardness of Spain, the halt to its production, even in the privileged textile sector?"¹⁵ That was and has remained one of the major questions in Spanish history.

On one point of detail, Israel is right to question my statement that French economic domination dated from the early seventeenth century.¹⁶ Though the statement is true in part, particularly for the kingdom of Aragon, it was meant to be no more than a broad schema; and I could equally be criticized for leaving out the English, the Dutch and the Portuguese. On the Dutch, for example, we are assured that "when Sancho de Moncada was writing, Spain was objectively an economic colony of Flanders".¹⁷ I likewise deliberately omitted the Genoese, whose seventy-year period of control over Castilian capitalism is studied in a forthcoming book by Felipe Ruiz Martín. The role of these foreign influences remains to be examined before historians can be clear about the nature of dependence in *ancien régime* Spain.

Where I differ vigorously from Israel is over a matter marginal to the main argument. Anxious to identify an "abrupt and sudden" decline in Spain, and finding no researched evidence for it, he resorts to the testimony of Sancho de Moncada and two other contemporaries from the Toledo region.¹⁸ Moncada is indeed very specific about the recent crisis in population. He discounts the impact of the great epidemic of 1596-1602¹⁹ (cost: over half a million lives²⁰) and the expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609-14 (loss from Spain: 275,000 people; from the crown of Castile alone: 91,000²¹). Israel appears to follow Moncada in believing that "during the first decade of the seventeenth century Spain was still rich".²² Moncada's view was that despite the catastrophes I have mentioned, the real disaster came between 1616 and 1619.²³ These dates fortuitously coincide with some complaints

¹⁵ Joseph Pérez, *L'Espagne du XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1973), p. 18. Pérez specifically refers to Spain as a case of underdevelopment (p. 22).

¹⁶ His claim, however, that "French cargoes were rigorously excluded from Spain and the Indies for a quarter of a century", is utterly untrue. See, for example, John Lynch, *Spain under the Habsburgs*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1965-9), ii, p. 156: "in 1638 revenue from licences yielded 255,460 ducats, indicating a substantial trade with France"; and of course these figures exclude the very substantial overland trade to Navarre and Aragon.

¹⁷ Moncada, *Restauración política de España*, ed. Vilar, p. 60.

¹⁸ See pp. 178-9, 171, and n. 7 above.

¹⁹ Not 1599-1602, as Israel has it on p. 179 above. Israel also cites me (p. 179) as saying that Moncada attributed the crisis to the epidemics. My exact words were: he was writing in *the shadow of the great epidemics*: Kamen, "The Decline of Spain", p. 35.

²⁰ A recent summary is Bernard Vincent, "La peste atlántica de 1596-1602", *Asclepio*, xxviii (1976), pp. 5-25.

²¹ For the ambiguous impact of the expulsion on the capital of New Castile, Ciudad Real, see Carla Rahn Phillips, *Ciudad Real, 1500-1750* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 29, 55-6, 114-15.

²² See p. 179 above.

²³ Moncada, *Restauración política de España*, ed. Vilar, pp. 135, 137.

in the Cortes, and with the famous report of the Council of Castile in 1619.

Moncada's local crisis loomed large in his mind because it was recent and Toledo must certainly have suffered from the drought of 1615-16 and the move of people from the region to the now permanent (since 1606) capital of Madrid. But from a broader perspective the Moncada/Israel "abrupt and sudden" crisis of the "second decade of the century"²⁴ vanishes away. It is merely a regional variation of the population fall that in Valladolid is dated by Bennassar from the plague years;²⁵ and in Ciudad Real by Carla Rahn Phillips from 1604 at the latest.²⁶ Price data show nothing extraordinary: Hamilton indeed says that "remarkable stability of prices characterized the period 1611-20"²⁷ within the trough of the recession. Yet this is the very decade to which Israel dates his "ruinous migration" and "massive movement away from the countryside" throughout Spain.²⁸ I must emphasize that there are *no statistical data* in existence for these claims, least of all for the years 1616-19. Those who have studied Spain's rural history know that emigration, particularly in times of depression, is a constant of the countryside,²⁹ rather than a unique and dramatic experience of decline. And even where emigration is recorded, it appears to have occurred to a lesser extent in some provinces than is normally thought.³⁰

The problem is that many early modern historians, their eyes fixed on the disastrous events of the seventeenth century, are tempted to believe that a very particular type of change then took place in the fortunes of Spain. To talk of a "massive movement" of migration without any proof, however, is to fall into the familiar rhetoric of "decline", thereby obscuring the fact that the major symptoms of decline were recurrent in Spain's history.³¹ The perennial problem of an unfavourable balance of payments caused by underproductivity,

²⁴ See pp. 178-9 above.

²⁵ Bartholomé Bennassar, *Valladolid au Siècle d'Or* (Paris, 1967), p. 206: "The crisis of the end of the sixteenth century opens the series of great demographic catastrophes: 1615, 1630-1 . . .".

²⁶ Phillips, *Ciudad Real, 1500-1750*, pp. 22, 28. Growth here stopped in about 1575.

²⁷ Earl J. Hamilton, *American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501-1650* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934; repr. New York, 1970), p. 217.

²⁸ See pp. 179, 178 above.

²⁹ For modern examples reflecting the sixteenth-century experience, see, for example, Joseph B. Aceves and William A. Douglass (eds.), *The Changing Faces of Rural Spain* (New York, 1976), especially the essays by Stanley Brandes and Victor Pérez-Díaz; see also C. Lisón Tolosana; "Aspectos del cambio socio-cultural en una comunidad rural", in *Homenaje a Julio Caro Baroja* (Madrid, 1978), pp. 685-98.

³⁰ Cf. the observations and references in Edward E. Malefiakis, *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain* (New Haven, 1970), p. 105.

³¹ In the same way Israel states (on the basis of no evidence known to me) that "the general collapse of Castilian agriculture took place . . . in 1595-1621"; see p. 178 above. Not only I, but Fernand Braudel and Gonzalo Anés also (whom I quote in my "The Decline of Spain", pp. 34 n.45, 36 n.54), disclaim such certitude. Cf. the careful comments in Bennassar, *Valladolid au Siècle d'Or*, pp. 326-8.

for example, was in the mind of Rodrigo de Luján in 1516,³² of the Cortes deputy in 1548, of Luis Ortiz in 1558, of Floridablanca in 1788, of Franco's ministers in the 1960s. Apparent growth was a cosmetic over the country's basic industrial weakness. The trade of Barcelona increased remarkably in the late eighteenth century;³³ but, as Arthur Young observed in 1787, "the great business of the place is commission". In 1788 Floridablanca joyfully reported that Spain's exports to America had tripled between 1778 and 1788 and that the customs revenue had doubled. "Sir", protested an official who knew the truth behind the statistics, "it's all a fable; we stand like fools before the rest of the world".³⁴

No historian, perhaps, should be more of a defender of "decline" than myself. My study of the late seventeenth century,³⁵ a period hitherto accepted by all historians as being the epoch of most unquestionable decay, should have confirmed the judgements of Cánovas and Hamilton. It quickly became obvious, however, that the sweeping conclusions of historians were neither verifiable nor accurate, and that the testimony of contemporaries was often a reflection of their personal obsessions rather than of economic reality. By discussing Spain in the framework of dependence³⁶ we can begin to set the depression of the seventeenth century into its long-term context rather than expressing it in the inexact terminology of the *arbitristas*.

These necessarily brief comments are best terminated by the perceptive words of the great neurologist Ramón y Cajal: "Spain is intellectually backward, not decadent. Looked at globally, its achievement has been poor and hesitant, backward and above all deplorably insular in relation to the rest of Europe. Our preponderance in Europe was exclusively military, not cultural. Science, industry, agriculture, commerce — all aspects of thought and work in the epoch of the Catholic Kings and Charles V — were wholly inferior to those of Europe".³⁷ Allowing for exaggeration, this is a welcome antidote to the standard mythology. Only by discarding the "decadence" syndrome can historians work towards a constructive analysis of the weaknesses in Spain's economic development.

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³² Pérez, *L'Espagne du XVI^e siècle*, pp. 164-8, prints his memorial, which was addressed to Cardinal Cisneros.

³³ Pierre Vilar, *La Catalogne dans l'Espagne moderne*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1962), iii, pp. 481-6.

³⁴ For Young and Floridablanca, see Barbara and Stanley Stein, "Concepts and Realities of Spanish Economic Growth, 1759-1789", *Historia ibérica*, i (1973), pp. 107, 115.

³⁵ Henry Kamen, *Spain in the Later Seventeenth Century* (London, 1980).

³⁶ Israel seems to misconstrue what is meant by "dependence". For dependency and Spain, see my "The Decline of Spain", p. 41 n. 74; also Stanley and Barbara Stein, *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America* (New York, 1970), pp. 12-20.

³⁷ Santiago Ramón y Cajal, *Reglas y consejos sobre investigación científica (Los tónicos de la voluntad)*, 6th edn. (Madrid, 1923), cited in Ramón Tamames, *Estructura económica de España* (Madrid, 1960), pp. 198-9.