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The Centre Cannot Hold: Political Violence in the Interwar Period

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Fernando del Rey Reguillo y Manuel Álvarez Tardío: *Políticas del odio: violencia y crisis en las democracias de entreguerras*. Madrid, Tecnos, 2017. 489 pp.

Manuel Álvarez Tardío y Roberto Villa García: *Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular*. Barcelona, Espasa, 2017. 622 pp.

A century ago, a disaster of unprecedented scale and devastation gripped the world. This was not the conflict between the Central Powers and the Entente that had begun in August 1914; it was an influenza pandemic that by 1920 had claimed an estimated fifty to one hundred million lives. In other words, a death toll greater than the First and Second World Wars combined. It seriously debilitated the opposing armies in western Europe and by late spring 1918 over half of British and French troops fell sick; there were also 900,000 German casualties. Understandably, both sides refused to admit publicly the harm that influenza was inflicting on their men and it was only in neutral countries that open discussion was possible. So it came to pass that the British, Americans and French started calling the virus 'Spanish flu' after King Alonso XIII, his prime minister, and members of the cabinet had contracted the virus that May; it is still commonly known by this name in Anglo-Saxon countries.

The First World War powerfully influenced the development of the pandemic. Although the conflict did not 'create' the virus, it ensured that influenza spread rapidly. The first recorded case was that of Albert Gitchell, a mess cook in an American Army base in Kansas in March 1918; troop ships then carried the Spanish flu to Europe and beyond. By the time the Armistice was signed in November, a second and more lethal strain had taken hold in Europe. In the subsequent twelve months, the construction of the new post-war international order in Paris took place in the midst of great suffering. Among those who succumbed to the flu was American President Woodrow Wilson. While the illness did not kill him in March 1919, it contributed to a massive stroke the following October that left him paralysed down the left side and unable to participate fully in the domestic struggle to persuade Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles or join the League of Nations. In this sense, a weakened and exhausted President is more than simply an appropriate metaphor for the subsequent failure of Wilsonian liberal internationalism after 1919.

The influenza pandemic – 'the single most devastating infectious disease outbreak ever recorded' according to the World Health Organisation – is just one important reminder that 11 November 1918 did not bring to an end to mass death in Europe.

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In fact, the famous peacemakers in the French capital seem almost as ineffective in bringing peace as those overworked doctors and nurses who tried to stem the spread of the Spanish flu. As Robert Gerwarth has noted in The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923 (2016), between 1917 and 1920 'Europe experienced no fewer than twenty-seven violent transfers of political power, many of them accompanied by latent or open civil wars'. The geographical focus of this political violence were the 'shatter-zones' of central and eastern Europe, where the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian Empires, created a political vacuum that advocates of national or social revolution and their enemies sought to fill. Over four million people (including three million in Russia alone), would perish in this immediate 'post-war' period.

Although western Europe escaped the worst of the political violence, it was not immune. Contemporaries could see that neither neutral countries like Spain nor victors like Britain could escape the general malaise. As W.B. Yeats, the winner of the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature, put it in the 1919 poem 'The Second Coming', 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world'. An Irishman, Yeats saw at first hand the vicious struggle for Irish independence that would eventually lead to civil war in 1922-23.

The massive violence witnessed by 1923 would only be the prelude of the disasters that were to follow. In Europe, the 'war to end all wars' that would make 'the world safe for democracy', begat levels of political killing unseen in the continent since the Thirty Years War. No wonder then that August 1914 is seen as a profound caesura in world history. It was, to use George Kennan's famous phrase, the 'seminal catastrophe'; for Fernando del Rey, one of the editors of 'Políticas del odio', an excellent collection of essays on political violence during the inter-war period, it did nothing less than begin 'una era de revolución y violencia que a punto estuvo de destruir la civilización heredada de la Ilustración, el liberalismo y el pensamiento democrático que la precedieron' (p.104).

Fernando del Rey and Manuel Álvarez Tardío have brought together a team of outstanding historians to re-examine the reasons why Wilsonian dreams of a liberal democratic world turned into a dystopia of dictatorships, terror, and genocidal war. It is no accident the editors have brought together mainly Spanish based scholars who have written widely about the Spanish Second Republic and the Civil War. For these historians have sustained throughout their careers that political violence in 1930s Spain can be only be properly understood if it is placed in its proper international context. For this reason, Políticas del odio is a significant contribution to the growing historiography that challenges the clichés of Spanish exceptionalism. From my perspective as an 'Anglo-Saxon' historian, an English translation would be much welcomed given the continued persistence of the 'black legend'; it is depressing that a recent well-publicised book in Britain on the repression during and after the civil war saw fit to include the 'Inquisition' in its subtitle.

'Políticas del odio' is a wide-ranging study of political violence in geographical and chronological terms. Nigel Townson's chapter on racism and anti-communism in the United States after the First World War reveals the cruel paradox that President Roosevelt's 'New Deal', intended to preserve liberal democracy during the economic slump of the 1930s, was built on the institutionalized racism of the South. Julio de la Cueva provides a comprehensive chapter on anticlericalism, discussing the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Mexican Revolution after

1910. Especially interesting is his account of the 'guerra de los Cristeros' in the late 1920s which left over 75,000 dead in Mexico, including around ninety priests shot by federal troops. Although De la Cueva does not discuss it in his contribution, this violence might well help to explain why many Spanish Catholics reacted so strongly against the Republican anticlerical legislation of the early 1930s.

Nevertheless, the main focus of 'Politicas del odio' is the crisis in inter-war Europe. In 2011, Fernando del Rey edited a book on political violence in the Second Republic entitled 'Palabras como puños. La intransigencia política en la Segunda República Española', and given that many of the contributors of this volume have also written chapters for the book under review, it is not surprising that its explanatory model is broadly adopted in the introduction. Influenced by George Mosse, the editors stress the significance of the First World War in 'brutalising' politics; without the First World War the 1917 Russian Revolution would have been unthinkable. The emergence of 'culturas de guerra', which saw politics as a zero-sum exercise in which violence against a de-humanised enemy was both rational and desirable, posed a fundamental challenge to liberal democracy; this new culture of violence was especially significant among young Europeans who had not previously paid an important role in the politics. Although democracy frequently succumbed to the authoritarian threat (the number of democratic states fell from 24 in 1920 to barely 11 in 1939), the editors are at pains to point out that democracies (like Spain) were not doomed to fail. As Álvarez Tardío pointed out in the final concluding chapter, the destruction of democracy was based on a 'combinación explosiva de dos factores: de un lado, la existencia de grupos que legitimaban el uso de la fuerza y la estimulaban tanto cuanto podían para generar una opinión alarmista y una ruptura; y de otro, un Estado en manos de individuos o grupos a los que su compromiso ambiguo con una democracia pluralista e incluyente les impedía ser implacables en la defensa del Estado de derecho' (p.467).

This brief description hardly does credit to the complexity and nuance of the arguments employed in this study. For example, the authors are not blind to the limitations of Mosse's 'brutalisation' thesis, which cannot (for example), be applied to Spain. A welcome feature of this book is a suspicion of metanarratives that promises much but explains little. For instance, Enzo Traverso's schema of an 'European Civil War' based on a struggle between fascism and antifascism receives a critical reception in 'Políticas del odio'. On the one hand, the argument that western imperialism suggests a line of continuity between nineteenth-century liberalism and Nazi genocide is given short shrift. Del Rey argues that this 'teoría estigmatiza sin matiz alguno la historia del liberalismo y de la economía de mercado durante el siglo XIX' (p.108), and correctly points out that fascism took root in countries that became colonial powers very late (Germany and Italy) or not at all (Romania and Hungary). On the other hand, it is evident that 'no siempre todos los que se situaron contra el fascismo creían en el pluralismo democrático, por lo que en muchos casos agresores y víctimas compartían valores muy parecidos' (p.34).

'Politicas del odio' therefore does not see the growing fascist menace in the 1930s as an important factor in the radicalization of the Spanish left. Militant class-based politics contributed powerfully to the European catastrophe. In his chapter on the 'Gran Guerra y la pasión revolucionaria', Del Rey provides an unflinching yet convincing account of the devastating impact of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and Europe. But Lenin was not the only revolutionary who would wreak havoc on the

political fabric of Europe. His calls for the violent class liberation were paralleled by President Wilson's demands for national liberation. It was the conjunction of the discourses of proletarian and national freedom that would transform the political nature of the First World War and lay the basis of post-war violence. Despite its undoubted brutality, the conflict before 1917 was conventional in the sense that it was not an existential fight to the finish; the British and the French, for example, did not plan to destroy the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian empires. Yet Lenin and Wilson's intervention in the war would facilitate a logic where the annihilation of class and ethnic enemies was essential in the construction of the new order. Wilsonian nation-based democracy contained the seeds of its own destruction.

'Políticas del odio' is further evidence that Spanish historians can provide a significant and compelling contribution to the big debates on the history of the contemporary world. This is not to say, of course, that a wider perspective has come at the expense of modern Spanish history. The crisis of the 1930s still attracts an endless stream of books, articles and papers. Quantity is not the same as quality, but recent years has seen the publication of ground-breaking studies that will shape our understanding of the failure of Republican democracy for years to come. One such monograph is Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa García's '1936. Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular'. Given the controversy that this book has produced, it is worth remembering that the only other detailed national survey of the February 1936 election– the last national election for forty years– was written in 1971 by Javier Tusell.

Although the late historian's research had the virtue of rebutting Francoist claims that the Popular Front victory was illegitimate, important questions were left unanswered. The count was not carried out normally. Popular Front supporters celebrated victory hours after polls closed on 16 February following positive early results in some urban areas. This was premature to say the least; it was akin to the British Labour Party announcing they were going to form a government after winning in its electoral strongholds in South Wales. Nevertheless, leftist disorder led to the resignation of the caretaker centrist government of Manuel Portela Valladares on 19 February and its replacement by Manuel Azaña's Popular Front administration. This was unprecedented. At that time, Spanish constitutional practice demanded that the outgoing government complete the elections before meeting the new Spanish parliament. But local authorities appointed newly by the new government finished and verified the count. While this irregularity would not have mattered if one of the two main electoral slates was on course for a landslide, Tusell's figures indicated the difference in terms of votes was less than two per cent; this did not translate into a hung parliament due to the non-proportional nature of the electoral system. It is therefore entirely reasonable and legitimate to ask whether the chaotic nature of the latter part of the counting process could have affected the overall result of the election.

Álvarez Tardío and Villa García's hugely impressive study based on exhaustive research in local, national and international archives has provided a conclusive answer to this question. They provide an extraordinarily detailed account of the ill-tempered electoral campaign at all levels before giving a comprehensive account of the critical four days following the end of voting that produced a Popular Front government with a large majority. However, the most important section of the book is the lengthy discussion of the electoral results, and the subsequent verification of the figures by the national electoral board in the spring.

It should be noted that some of the claims of the book are not original. The authors' criticism of Alcalá-Zamora's determination to hold an election in early 1936 as 'notoria inoportunidad' (p.518) is one that few historians would quibble with. It is well-known that this fateful decision was motivated by the president's desire to create a new 'centre' party from above that would save Spain from the extremes of left and right. Still, Álvarez Tardío and Villa García's discussion of the zero-sum politics that characterised the election campaign makes the key point – ignored by many historians– that the CEDA leader José María Gil-Robles did not envisage a 'counter-revolutionary' victory to be a springboard for his party to rule alone; much to the disgust of extreme rightist figures like José Calvo Sotelo, Gil-Robles worked for re-forging of the centre-right alliance that had governed Spain since November 1933. This can be seen by the fact that the CEDA put forward less than 200 candidates for the 473 available seats.

The central thesis of '1936. Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular' is the claim that the abrupt departure of Portela Valladares on 19 February changed the outcome of the election. Azaña took power 'con unos resultados electorales incompletos… que… en absoluto confirmaban una mayoría parlamentaria de izquierdas' (p.522). Moreover the new government failed to contain 'la impresionante oleada de violencia' that meant that the count continued 'en un notorio ambiente de coacción' which 'influyó decisivamente en el reparto final de escaños, otorgando una victoria al Frente Popular por la que tanto habían presionado en la calle las izquierdas obreras' (pp. 522-523).

In no way is this 'neo-Francoist revisionism'. Álvarez Tardío and Villa García accept that the Popular Front performed extremely well compared to the previous election of November 1933, and got the most votes, although their figures– based a much wider dataset than that used by Tusell– suggests that its advantage over the 'Counter-Revolutionary' slate was tiny (31,570 out of 9.687 million votes cast). But given the Spanish electoral list system, where victorious slates won a majority of seats in cities and provinces irrespective of the margin of victory, even relatively small-scale irregularities could have a massive impact on the final result. And Álvarez Tardío and Villa García provide compelling evidence that this did indeed occur in a minority of provinces following the resignation of Portela Valladares. They describe in rich and meticulous detail the context of intimidation by Popular Front militants that facilitated electoral fraud at local level. Frequently and erroneously described as 'celebrations', 16 were killed and 39 wounded, over 50 churches and 70 conservative political centres were fired or attacked in the 36 hours after Portela Valladares abruptly left office. Only fraud and violence can explain results like those of Alcaudete in Jaén province, where the Popular Front list received all the 599 votes cast despite the fact that the village had voted overwhelmingly for the right in 1933.

It needs to be stressed that nowhere in this 600 page monograph do the authors assert that the civil war was inevitable. They show that CEDA's leaders called on Azaña to unite the country in the immediate aftermath of the election. Yet the Popular Front dominated electoral board subsequently annulled the rightist victories in Granada and Cuenca while upholding all of those of the left. Because of all this chicanery, the book under review argues that the left obtained between 29 to 33 seats, meaning that 'algo más de medio centenar, no fue fruto de una competencia electoral en libertad' (p.524). This is a startling conclusion, as it suggests that the Popular Front may not have won a parliamentary majority in 1936. But the sheer quality and

range of evidence provided by Álvarez Tardío and Villa García makes it a plausible one. In sum, the February 1936 election underlines Álvarez Tardío's warning made in 'Políticas del odio': a failure to defend resolutely the rule of law from extremists of all kinds seriously imperils the survival of liberal democracy.