SPAIN IN THE “AGE OF REVOLUTIONS”

To begin the history of modern Spain in 1808 is, as is always the case in periodization, a somewhat arbitrary decision. In the traditional “failure” model of modern Spain, 1808 marked the moment when the tottering old regime, including its vast but poorly managed empire, was delivered the death blow by the invasion of Napoleon’s armies. In this version, because liberal ideas were imported and imposed from the outside, the revolutionary era was more ephemeral in its long-term impact, the opening act in an ongoing struggle between “two Spains,” in which the “modern” sector was always the weaker. In the revisionist version, 1808 was still a crucial turning point, the beginning of a liberal and national revolution that opened Spain’s modern era and demonstrated parity with what was happening in the rest of western Europe.

The year of 1808 serves both narratives because it symbolizes the inauguration of the “triple crisis” of the old regime, including the dynastic crisis sparked by the abdication of the Bourbon king and his heir, the sovereign crisis generated by the invasion of French troops and the constitutional crisis produced by the weakened legitimacy of the Spanish monarchy. The resistance against the French, which led to the convocation in 1810 of a constitutional parliament, or Cortes, that claimed its legitimacy from the sovereignty of the nation, unleashed Spain’s version of the political revolution that came to define the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Even though the “age of revolutions” was followed by an absolutist restoration in 1814, whose founding principle was to return to the status quo ante “as if such things had never happened,” in the words of the new King Ferdinand VII’s decree, there was no going back to the eighteenth-century Spanish monarchy. Thus, the issues raised in this period opened a new political era that defined the parameters of debate and struggle for the next century and a half.

While 1808 marks a convenient opening act of the “modern” era in Spain (similar to 1789 for France), this political turning point was embedded in a longer transitional period, from the 1780s to the 1820s, marked by long-term structural changes and short-term economic crisis. At the global level, this transition culminated in radical changes in forms of government and regulation of the economy, as well as dramatic shifts in the global distribution of power. At the same time, there
were significant continuities across an old regime that was more dynamic than once believed, and an emerging liberal order that took root slowly and unevenly.2

In the failure narrative, Spain was thought to be left behind during this era of global transformation, but the revisionist scholarship has painted a more dynamic portrait of an economy and society that embarked on a trajectory of gradual growth and change in the late eighteenth century that continued into the twentieth century.3

As a jumping-off point for a book on modern Spain, this chapter will provide a snapshot of the early nineteenth century, from Spain’s position in the global order to its economic and social structure, and ending with the political crisis of 1808–1814 that marked the, admittedly porous, boundary between eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The metaphor of a “snapshot” taken from a moving train communicates better than a more static word like “baseline” a non-linear transition from the old regime to the modern era.

Spain in Europe and the World, 1780s–1820

At the European center of the transitional and tumultuous period of the “age of revolutions” were the major empires of the era, especially the Spanish, French and British, which came into intensifying conflict around an increasingly global network of trade, commerce and consumption.4 (See Map I.) All the imperial governments responded to this competition with reforms aimed to better capture and channel profits and revenues for their benefit.5 The need for larger and more secure income streams was in turn driven by the increased military expenditure of overseas empires engaged in global warfare. But such reforms also generated colonial revolts, particularly in the Atlantic empires, which required yet more military expenditure to suppress. The fiscal crisis that afflicted all the major empires also encouraged risky political reforms, most famously the French monarch’s summoning of the representative institution, the Estates General, which launched the iconic French revolution.

In contrast to the classic Marxist narrative that interpreted this economic and political crisis as the result of an industrial and bourgeois class revolution that set in motion the unraveling of old-regime Europe in the late eighteenth century, recent scholarship downplays the impact of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth-century political crisis. Scholars now accept that the picture of a European industrial transformation as well under way by the early nineteenth century was greatly exaggerated. Thus, in 1840, 45 percent of the world’s industrial production came from Britain, with a second industrial node emerging in Belgium only after the 1830s.6 From this perspective, there is no failed industrial or bourgeois revolution to explain for the Spanish case.

Apart from the British exception, industrialization trajectories in the rest of Europe only began to diverge dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century. Even then, national industrialization statistics would still be misleading. That is, most of the nineteenth century continental industrialization would be concentrated in a core area of central Europe that encompassed regions of various countries, including northern Italy and northern France, western Germany and
Belgium, all of which shared the favorable conditions of rich coal deposits, navigable rivers, dense population and fertile land. Furthermore, industrialization was not the only path to economic growth and greater prosperity. Thus, some of the most “successful” European economies based their growth on agriculture and commerce well into the twentieth century, as was the case with the Netherlands and the rest of France. Even in England, the majority of adult workers in the mid-nineteenth century still worked in the agricultural sector, while less than 5 percent worked in factories.

Like industrialization, urbanization also proceeded gradually, at least until the 1870s. Thus, the basic patterns of spatial organization of cities had not changed much from the outset of the sixteenth-century expansion to the 1780s. During this period, the global urban population grew slowly, from 9 percent in 1600 to 12 percent in 1800, a percentage that did not increase significantly until after the 1870s. While capital cities like London, Paris and Berlin doubled in size in the first half of the century, most continental Europeans, including Spaniards, lived in small towns and villages. The point is that the impact of urbanization, like industrialization, was both uneven and fairly limited in scope outside of England in the early nineteenth century.

If most Europeans lived and worked in an agrarian economy and society in the early nineteenth century, there was also tremendous variety within this sector. One model was France, with a majority of commercial family farms and a prosperous peasant class. Another structure dominated in the eastern European countries like Poland and Russia, in which most farmland was divided into huge aristocratic estates worked by serf labor, often with low productivity. A third agrarian reality was small subsistence farming, in which poor peasants still operated on the margins of the commercial economy. In many of the European countries, but especially Spain, this variety of agrarian structures co-existed within their national borders, shaped by landowning patterns, connection to markets, soil fertility and topography, and population density. Thus, just as there was no monolithic transformation to an industrial and urban society, there was no uniform “traditional” agrarian society waiting to be transformed.

What was happening across the globe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a series of “industrious revolutions,” powered by rising consumer demand, which reorganized both production and consumption and increased trade as well as specialization, including in the form of the slave plantations of the Caribbean and North America. In the Atlantic world of the Spanish, French and British empires, merchants created links between goods and consumers, bringing tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco from the Americas to European households. In Spain, a burgeoning calico industry in Catalonia fed the fashion trends of well-heeled consumers across the empire. These industrious revolutions produced great wealth, but also dramatic inequalities, within societies and between them. On the global level this inequality inaugurated the “great divergence” in wealth, life expectancy and productivity between western Europe and the rest of the world that became one of the defining themes of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, the hierarchies within Europe, between core and periphery, were also shifting, but in the eighteenth-century economy Spain’s future as a European power was still hard to predict. Key to Spain’s potential success in the
shifting global economy was building a more effective trading and commercial relationship with its American colonies. The successful reconstitution of empires to meet the challenges of the global economy would be a crucial factor in determining which states emerged from the crisis of the late eighteenth century as great powers in the nineteenth century. By 1820, the future trajectory of European imperialism was not yet clear. In some cases, reconstitution involved losing some colonies and gaining others, as with Britain and France, while Spain took the less advantageous route of colonial contraction (between 1810 and 1825 it lost continental America) and reorganization of its remaining colonies in the Antilles and Philippines.11

Still, Spain’s colonial contraction was not an inevitable outcome of the eighteenth-century crisis. Thus, the eighteenth-century Spanish monarchy was making a valiant and at least partially successful attempt, with the so-called “Bourbon reforms,” to transform itself from a “conquest” empire into an effective commercial empire, an effort which was not by any means destined for failure and dissolution.12 Although it was true that Spain’s position as the old empire put it in the defensive position of having to scramble to adapt to the rapidly evolving commercial and imperial dynamics, the image of a sclerotic and desiccated Spanish empire that was waiting for one straw for the entire edifice to come tumbling down has been convincingly challenged. Transatlantic loyalty to the Spanish monarchy remained strong throughout the Napoleonic period, even as creole and metropolitan elites tried to negotiate a common solution to the crisis of imperial sovereignty. The loss of the American colonies emerged from what one scholar calls a “chain of disequilibria,” not the inherent weakness of the empire or the challenge of nationalist movements.13 Scholars disagree as to the point of no return in American independence, but few would identify 1808 as that moment.

Just as important for Spain’s position in the short term was the economic crisis of the Napoleonic era, but the negative effects were also not as uniquely devastating to Spain as once believed. Development was also interrupted in France, and the German lands suffered from French occupation and a dramatic drop in trade. For Spain, the traditional estimate of a 75 percent decline in Spanish trade between 1792 and 1827 has now been revised, leading to a more optimistic reading.14 While it is true that certain sectors declined, the impact was uneven and recovery and adaptation was relatively quick. In particular, the Atlantic port of Cádiz, which had dominated the Indies trade in the eighteenth century, experienced a virtual economic collapse from which it never fully recovered. But in other cases, goods that had been exported to the Indies quickly found other markets, like Castilian wheat and iron, which went to Cuba, and Catalan textiles, which shifted to peninsular markets and then Cuba.15 The bottom line is that existing evidence does not support the claim that the world crisis of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries propelled Spain to permanent periphery status in the nineteenth-century world.

A Snapshot of the Economy: Gradual Growth

From the perspective of European economic diversity in the early nineteenth century, economic historians have stopped asking the ahistorical question of why Spain failed to follow the English path during this period, and turned their attention to
what did happen and why. The most convincing “snapshot” of the Spanish economy in the early nineteenth century paints a picture of gradual economic and social change and sustained growth that began in the latter decades of the eighteenth century and continued through the nineteenth, propelled by demographic growth, growing commercialization and specialization, and regional trading networks. Thus, commercialized agriculture developed in the Mediterranean regions, a textile industry took shape in Catalonia and an emerging real estate market opened up more land for exploitation. At the same time, most of these developments remained local and regional in scope and impact, with a clear contrast between a more dynamic periphery and a slower growing center. The result was an uneven and unintegrated economic landscape that didn’t add up to a dynamic or national “Spanish” economy in the early nineteenth century.

An analysis of the peninsular economy in the 1770s makes clear that the natural conditions for any sort of English-style agricultural or industrial “take-off” were highly unfavorable. Without arguing for a geographical determinism that leaves no room for human agency, Spain had fewer of the raw conditions that fueled growth in the more successful economies. First, the peninsula was a large expanse of territory with geographical impediments to easy communication of goods and people. In contrast to the small island nation of England, which was also well-connected by rivers, Spain had few navigable rivers to connect its hinterland with the coasts, and was divided by forbidding mountainous ranges, including the one that separated the peninsula from the rest of continental Europe. (See Map II.) It was also one of the most sparsely populated of the European countries, making it even more costly to construct market networks. Equally important, Spain had only small amounts of the coal and iron that proliferated in what would be the core industrial area of Europe. The combination of poor-quality coal and iron and expensive transport meant that, in the early nineteenth century it was cheaper to import British coal to Catalonia than to extract and transport Spanish coal.

In terms of Spanish agriculture, unfavorable natural conditions deserve much of the blame for yields and productivity that were among the lowest in western Europe. Thus, Spain had the lowest rainfall in western Europe, and generally poor soil which was not well-suited to growing crops. These conditions also meant that Spanish agriculture could not take advantage of the technological innovations that had been so successful in increasing yields in England, like the ox-drawn plow.

Beyond natural conditions, there were also historical and political reasons for the unfavorable context for an agricultural revolution. In the English case, the enclosure movement of the late eighteenth century secured a regime of private property at the same time that it freed up a displaced rural workforce for industrialization. In Spain, most land was still tied up in complex ownership relationships that made private investment difficult. Thus, two-thirds of the land surface of Spain was owned either by the Church or held in entail by noble families, which meant that it could not be bought or sold. Furthermore, a good chunk of the rest was common land, owned by the Crown or by cities and towns, either used collectively or leased out to tenants. Even if part of this land was cultivated, tenants had to pay stiff taxes or even seigneurial dues to the owners. Because so much land was tied up in manos muertas, literally dead hands, prices for the remaining land available for sale were driven up by the scarcity. As a result, less than 25 percent of the arable land in Spain was under cultivation in 1815.
Adding another layer to the obstacles to agricultural improvement was the seigneurial regime, which divided parts of the kingdom into private fiefdoms, although much more unevenly than in classic feudal societies like France. While seigneurialism was abolished in France during the Revolution, securing property rights for a large number of peasant proprietors, in Spain the seigneurial regime was abolished briefly in 1812–14 and again in 1820, but it was not permanently dismantled until the 1840s. Thus, in 1800, there were over 13,000 intact señoríos in Spain, which covered about two-thirds of the territory. About half of the farming population were subjected to the jurisdictional rule of a señorío, which in some cases meant that the noble lord had rights to everything from certain services, to taxes and rents, and he served as mayor, judge and local administrator.

One final disincentive to invest in farmland were the traditional privileges maintained by the powerful sheep grazing lobby, the Mesta. From the middle ages, the graziers had maintained the privilege of migrating their sheep from summers in the mountains of Old Castile and León to winters in the plains of Extremadura and Andalucía. In 1800 an estimated five million sheep had rights to pass through any properties in their path on their 550- to 900-kilometer journey, and they regularly disrupted farms and trampled crops. The Mesta’s so-called right of
possession had originated when wool was the center of the Castilian economy, but even after agriculture had surpassed it in importance, the lobby remained powerful enough to maintain its privileges until 1836, when it was abolished as part of the liberal reforms to create more secure private property.

Uneven Regional Development: Center/Periphery Divide

While all of these natural and manmade conditions meant that dramatic economic transformation was an unlikely scenario, a more fine-grained regional analysis reveals an evolving rather than a stagnant economy and society, with dynamic nodes located particularly on the periphery. The divergence between a more dynamic periphery and a more slowly growing center began in the eighteenth century, when almost all of the important early modern cities of the interior, except Madrid and Zaragoza, declined. Thus, although the total urban population in Spain remained stable from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, peripheral cities like Barcelona, Málaga, Valencia and Santander were expanding, as was the total percentage of the population living in the periphery.

The most dynamic region was Catalonia, where commercial activity from the 1730s deepened into regional economic growth from the 1750s, with investment in commercial agriculture and manufacturing, linked to American silver mining and foreign trade. At the center of this economy was Barcelona, which grew from 30,000 inhabitants in 1717 to 100,000 in 1800. During this period, Barcelona became the most important Spanish Mediterranean port, second only to Cádiz in the volume and value of trade, which quadrupled between 1760 and 1792. While some of this trade involved re-exporting European goods, 90 percent of the Barcelona exports in the 1790s were Spanish goods, about half of them manufactures, especially textiles, hats and paper. By this point there were almost 100 textile-manufacturing enterprises in Barcelona, including spinning factories and calico printing, with mechanization in the spinning sector from the 1790s. The rest of the exports came from Catalonia’s commercial agriculture sector, including wine and brandy, as well as its fishing industry.

The Mediterranean Regional Network

But the Catalan economy was also integrated into a broader regional network that encompassed the Mediterranean coast of Valencia, Alicante, Murcia and Eastern Andalucía, anchored by the port cities of Valencia, Alicante, Cartagena and Málaga. This network coalesced in the early eighteenth century and became increasingly vibrant as the century progressed. In fact, most of Barcelona’s trade was carried out along this Mediterranean trade route, with a relatively small percentage destined for the Americas. The second important node in this network was Valencia, which developed a thriving commercial agriculture in citrus and rice from the middle of the eighteenth century, as well as a silk textile industry. Further down the coast, Alicante and Cartagena became entrepôt ports for the Madrid market, trading Valencian rice for Castilian wheat, and Málaga produced wine and raisins, doubling its exports between the 1740s and the 1780s. All of these coastal cities also
developed inland trading routes, from Valencia to Andalucía, Málaga to Granada and Alicante to Madrid, which were intensified in response to the Napoleonic blockade and the disruption in the American markets. While pieces of this Mediterranean trading system certainly suffered from these economic crises, by the 1820s, recovery was under way, fueled by the rapidly growing sugar and slave economy in Cuba as well as a reorientation towards the peninsular market.

The agricultural portion of this regional dynamism was at least partly enabled by land tenure arrangements specific to the region. In Catalonia, many prosperous peasant farmers benefitted from a practice of *emphyteusis*, which gave them inherited rights to farm, even without ownership. And in Valencia, there were fewer forms of interference with private property, especially the rights of the Crown and the towns. While land ownership was not widespread, wealthy farmers who rented land from noble or Church owners had favorable leases that encouraged investment in irrigation and intensive farming for the specialized crops that would define the region’s agriculture. In 1785, the Crown strengthened the leaseholders’ position with a decree that a leaseholder could only be evicted if the owner wanted to farm himself. While old-regime privileges like entail and tax exemptions still disadvantaged non-noble farmers, when the liberal land sales began in the 1830s, these farmers had accumulated sufficient capital to buy the land they worked, while few of the noble seigneurs were able to convert their privileges into ownership. The result was a growing culture of “agrarian individualism” even within the old-regime constraints. The commercialized and specialized agriculture that developed in this context illustrates the point about the heterogeneity of the Spanish economy as well as the evolving dynamism of specific sectors.

**The North Atlantic Regional Network**

The second and smaller peripheral regional network encompassed the northern Atlantic coast from the Basque provinces to Galicia. Although this network did not reach its peak until railways facilitated transport in the second half of the nineteenth century, from the mid-eighteenth century the pieces of a regional commercial economy founded on small-scale commercial agriculture and mining began to come together. Until that point, the northern provinces of Galicia, Asturias and Santander had remained fairly isolated behind mountain ranges, with local and mostly self-sufficient small farms. With a landholding pattern very different from the Mediterranean coast, there were a large number of peasant proprietors but with small plots and less than 25 percent landless laborers. There was still variation within this general framework of small peasant-owned farms. For example, there was a predominance of even smaller plots, or *minifundia*, in Galicia, as a result of the inheritance law that required division of the property among all children. In this context, the hand-made linen industry provided extra income for families whose plots could not sustain a subsistence agriculture. On the other hand, the Basque provinces’ culture of primogeniture kept family farms intact over the generations, while extra employment was available in the iron industry. Nevertheless, the common denominator of small plots meant that the rising population of the eighteenth century pushed the limits of a subsistence economy well before the 1830s.
The first node of this regional economic network was Bilbao, where a charcoal and water-powered iron industry was exporting iron in addition to Castilian wool to other Spanish ports as well as to England from the early eighteenth century. The iron industry employed several thousand people, who worked mining the ore, transporting it to the coast, refining it and loading it on ships. Then, from the 1750s, the highway linking Santander to Castile further opened the wheat market from the interior and encouraged regional specialization of products, from nuts to fruits. The road from the Asturian coal mines to the port of Gijón in the 1780s enhanced the east-west trade, making it feasible to ship Asturian coal to the Basque iron foundries. And, when the Crown revoked Cádiz’s monopoly on the colonial trade in 1778, Santander and La Coruña (Galicia) became entrepôt ports for goods from Europe and the Basque provinces to America, although they remained much smaller than the Mediterranean ports.

While the Napoleonic blockade and loss of the protected colonial market certainly decimated the entrepôt trade and induced a crisis in specific exports like Asturian coal and Basque iron, once again the network as a whole recovered and adapted relatively quickly. Thus, in Galicia the decline of hand-made linens was replaced by cattle export and tanning industries, and Santander’s port facilities began to export flour made from Castilian wheat in exchange for Cuban sugar. Slower to recover were Asturian coal mining and Basque iron-making, which had to wait for the railroads in the 1840s and 1850s, but by the second half of the nineteenth century these industries had become the vibrant core of a regional network more on par with its Mediterranean counterpart.

Together, these two peripheral regional networks generated a significant proportion of the economic growth and dynamism in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century peninsula. The peripheral economies were hubs of commercial investment, shipping, specialization and mining and manufacturing, fitting the definition of dynamic “industrious” economies. Blessed with favorable conditions, both geographical and historical, these networks were on an upward trajectory that began in the early to mid-eighteenth century and continued through the nineteenth, with a relatively brief hiatus in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Geographically, the access to ports and water transport, with coal and iron located in reasonable proximity to them, provided a huge advantage. In terms of historical context, the relatively high percentage of peasant owners or long-term tenants created more incentives to specialize for a market made accessible by water transport. At the same time, the expense of overland transport and the complex system of internal tariffs kept these dynamic nodes relatively autonomous, separate from each other and the rest of Spain until the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Regional Networks of the Center

In contrast to the periphery, the vast hinterland of Castile, León, Extremadura, la Mancha and inland or western Andalucía, which constituted the other two regional networks, had fewer advantages for economic development, since the demographic collapse of the late sixteenth century devastated the vibrant medieval economy. Sustained mainly by the large consumer market of the capital,
Madrid, the expense of overland transport and the declining and dispersed interior population hindered trading networks and limited specialization. The region mostly produced basic crops, especially wheat but also olive oil and sherry further south in Andalucía. As the other interior cities declined or stagnated, Madrid grew 400 percent from 1700 to 1900, with trading routes fanning out like spokes absorbing products from the surrounding countryside and as far away as Old Castile and Andalucía. In the eighteenth century, much of this trade was controlled by complex regulations and subsidized purchases meant to guarantee the provisioning of the capital, but by the end of the century the trend was towards reliance on market mechanisms with state intervention only in food crises. However, it was not until the construction of the railroads that the internal regional market could flourish, with grain transported cheaply out to the coast as well as in to Madrid.

Another more historical disadvantage to economic development in this part of the country were the distinct landholding and settlement patterns. In contrast to the small peasant properties of the north or the secure tenant leases of the Mediterranean, the center and south of the peninsula was divided into often huge estates. South of a line running from Salamanca to Albacete, only an average of 8 percent of peasants (and as low as 5 percent in some parts) owned their land, while up to 75 percent of the farming population were landless laborers. On the other end of the hierarchy, a small number of often absentee nobles owned huge estates, or latifundia, a social and economic structure that dated from the medieval reconquest. In some cases, the Church owned the land—as much as 15–20 percent in Castile. Another chunk of land belonged to municipalities, sometimes maintained as common land and sometimes rented out to provide income for the township. In its efforts to assert its authority over such a vast territory that had been mostly occupied by Moors, the Crown bestowed huge tracts of land to nobles, military orders and the Church to administer. The resulting unequal social structure limited consumer demand and purchasing power, thus compounding the difficulties of building a dynamic market.

While there is no question that all these conditions created an interior economy that was less dynamic than the periphery, it is also important not to paint an exaggerated picture of stagnation. Thus, the fact that this agricultural economy could supply a dynamic Madrid population, in addition to sending increasing amounts of wheat to the periphery over the course of the nineteenth century, indicates a significant level of commercialization and economic growth. The reality of cheap and abundant labor and the poor quality of the soil did not encourage mechanization or capital-intensive farming, with or without equitable land ownership. Thus, even in the northwest, where peasant proprietorship or secure tenancy was higher, crops and farming methods were not significantly different from the latifundia-dominated south.

Nevertheless, the expansion of land under cultivation suggests responsiveness to demand and at least some viable land market. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Crown was selling some of its own land and had begun a process of expropriating Church land that led to a one-sixth reduction in ecclesiastical property by 1808. Finally, in 1798 the Crown permitted the sale of some entailed estates, allowing some noble families to sell off pieces of land.
The point is, the process of selling, enclosing and cultivating more land to expand production, which will be the hallmark of Spanish agriculture in the nineteenth century, was already under way before the massive property transfers of the 1830s–1860s.

**Demography: A Growth Pattern**

The best evidence for a gradual growth model was the fact that economic growth kept pace with steady population growth. Thus, the population maintained an upward trajectory from the early eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, stimulating the economy rather than overwhelming it. After the demographic crisis of the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, the population grew by 50 percent over the course of the eighteenth century, finally reaching sixteenth-century levels in the 1770s. Between the two censuses of 1797 and 1833, the total population continued to grow, from 10.5 million to 12.3 million, despite the crisis of the Napoleonic years. As a result of this crisis, Spain’s population growth was weakest during this first third of the century, then picked up steam, adding another 3 million before the 1857 census. Although this growth rate was slower than that of Britain, which doubled its population in the first half of the century, it was on par with that of France, the German states and Italy.

As important as the growth itself was the transition toward a “modern” demographic pattern of permanent growth, replacing the old-regime pattern of growth spikes followed by demographic catastrophes. Across Europe, it was at some point in the nineteenth century that improved agricultural productivity, better commercial networks and industrialization allowed most societies to break the population boom and bust cycle. However, population growth was still regularly interrupted by epidemics and malnutrition, and life expectancy, especially among infants, didn’t begin to rise significantly until the 1870s. Thus, millions died in cholera epidemics, and major hungers could still take a toll, most notably, of course, the Irish famine. Equally important, life expectancy for the poor was significantly lower than for the wealthy, with a 12-year differential in mid-century Germany, for example.

If the demographic transition was slower and more gradual across Europe, Spain still ranked near the bottom of most indicators. Thus, Spain experienced deadly outbreaks of cholera into the 1880s and episodes of food crisis into the 1870s, while life expectancy and other health indicators were on the low end of the European spectrum, worse only in Russia and parts of eastern Europe. Although women suffered from epidemics as well, childbirth was still their highest cause of death into the late nineteenth century. At the same time, however, Spaniards themselves lived better than they had a century earlier, and even the poorest landless laborers lived longer in the mid-nineteenth century than in the mid-eighteenth century. Overall, then, the evidence supports the picture of a demographic transition under way, with steady population growth but more slowly improving indicators of standard of living.
Characteristics of the Population: Occupation and Social Structure

Who were these people and what did they do? Given the portrait of a growing but segmented and diverse economic structure, the characteristics of the population also varied considerably, although the common denominator was a heavily rural and agrarian economy with a traditional corporate social structure. In global terms, about 70 percent of the population worked in agriculture in 1797, while another 7 percent were employed in other occupations, including artisan and industrial manufacture and domestic service for women. Of the 4 million peasants with land tenure, 2.3 million were proprietors and 1.77 were renters, while almost the same number—3.7 million—were landless laborers. Peasant landowners were further divided between those with enough land to hire laborers, those who didn’t usually hire but who produced a surplus that supported a family, and those whose property was insufficient to support their family and had to supplement their income through working as a laborer on larger farms.

For all peasant households, the family was the foundational corporate unit in which men, women and children defined their roles. All members of the household worked, in a “family economy” that depended on the contributions of all its members. Women and children performed particular farming tasks, such as olive harvesting, weeding or animal slaughter, and sometimes engaged in domestic production, like spinning, bobbin making and linen weaving. In addition, many peasant men and women engaged in part-time artisan labor for their own consumption, including bread baking, food preservation, leather curing for bags and sandals and cloth making for family clothes. Especially in the weakly developed market of the interior agrarian economy, many of these rural households mixed commercial and subsistence strategies.

Under the common umbrella of an agrarian society, the structure of peasant life varied significantly, depending on landholding patterns. Thus, in the northern regions with smaller farms and larger peasant ownership, settlement tended to be in small villages organized around the family homestead. There were few great nobles, or grandees, living in this area but a large number of lesser nobles, or hidalgos. Rooted in the early phases of the reconquest when entire villages attained universal nobility, in parts of Asturias, the Basque Country and Navarre, as much as 90 percent of the population claimed this status. In the provinces just south, such as León, Burgos, Alava and Rioja, between 20 and 40 percent of the population were hidalgo families. However, there could be significant variation even within a small territory, as illustrated in the classic study of Navarre at the start of the nineteenth century. On the one hand was the Montaña, which contained 700 individual settlements, each with an average of 200 residents, many of them hidalgos. On the other hand was the dry flat territory of the Ribera, divided into large landholdings worked by landless laborers, who lived in one of 25 agro-towns of between 1,000 and 3,000 residents. This latter pattern of settlement was the dominant one in the south of the peninsula, where these laborers lived in barracks and worked seasonally, employed at less than subsistence wages and surviving on a basic diet of thin gazpacho and bread.
In general, the non-agricultural population was concentrated in the larger market towns and cities. At the bottom of the urban hierarchy were those who lived on charity, often unskilled workers’ families who had lost a wage earner, or those who were mentally or physically ill. Single or widowed women were especially likely to fall into destitution (the 1860 census estimated that two-thirds of resident beggars were female). The urban working poor, both male and female, performed a variety of jobs, few of which were unique to the old-regime economy. Poor women worked as laundresses, seamstresses, wet nurses and domestic servants, a category that would increase dramatically in the first half of the nineteenth century. There were also several thousand female factory workers, mostly textile workers in Barcelona and tobacco workers in the state factories established from the end of the eighteenth century in Madrid, Seville, Gijón and other cities. About half of textile workers were men, but the tobacco factories were almost uniquely female factory environments, as immortalized in Bizet’s opera, Carmen. Outside of Barcelona, most of the textile workers in the linen and silk industries operated hand-looms in their homes, in a “putting out” system run by merchant suppliers, as was the case in Valencia. Another category of urban worker were the port workers, in addition to various unskilled laborers in the building trades and artisan apprentices and journeymen who worked for master shoemakers, bakers, tailors and carpenters, even though the guild system was in decline from the late eighteenth century. The poorest were also most likely to be recruited as foot soldiers in the royal army, which had a reputation for collecting the dregs of society and providing dreadful conditions.

Above the working poor were the middling class of master artisans, public administrators, teachers and the liberal professions, although, with the exception of artisans, this class would not really expand until the 1830s–50s with the growth of the new liberal state, after which they filled expanding jobs in the public administration, education and media. Finally, there was a small class of wealthy commoners, which included merchants, industrialists, financiers, commercial farmers and high officials in the state, Church or army administration, most of whom lived either in the peripheral cities or in Madrid. The industrialists resided mainly in Barcelona, with the merchant and financial elites distributed between that city and the port cities of Valencia, Cádiz, Santander, Bilbao and Málaga. Once again, this was a fairly small group that only began to take shape as a new economic and political elite class after the 1830s and the abolition of the last of the old-regime privileges.

Until then, the elite stratum of society was largely comprised of the first two “estates,” that is nobles and clergy, who were well-represented in the population, with about 4 percent in each category (compared with less than 3 percent total in pre-revolutionary France). In 1800, the ratio of regular clergy, which included monks, nuns and friars, to the general population was 1:160, while that of aristocrats was 1:12, and there were 1,300 titled noble families. Both clergy and nobles were exempt from direct taxes and enjoyed special privileges, such as access to high administrative posts and the upper military ranks, judgment by special courts, entailed estates and, for some, seigneurial jurisdiction and rents. These rights included rents for the land and for essential services, fees for butchers and bakers, the right to appoint officials in town and village councils, and sometimes
control over fishing or forestry. In addition to these rights, the Church collected a tithe, which may have constituted as much as half of the net agricultural product in the early nineteenth century. In any case, 60 percent of all land belonged to the Church or the nobility in 1800, most of it tied up in entailed estates, even though most of the wealthy clergy and nobles lived in the cities and towns, not on their land. More present in ordinary peoples’ lives were the 16,675 parish clergy, whose wealth, education and status varied widely, depending on the parish. The parish priests not only baptized the general population’s children and sanctified their marriages but provided the only charity “safety net” in the old-regime society by caring for the poor.

While this top-heavy social structure would seem to support a picture of a stagnant and feudalized society, in fact this snapshot occludes the long-term decline in the economic and social power of the nobility and the Church even before the liberal revolution of the 1830s. In reality, the power of the nobility had been in decline relative to the Crown since the sixteenth century, but this period was a significant turning point. Even numerically, the proportion of nobles vis a vis the rest of the population had dropped to 1:34 by 1826. In addition, the historical authority that rested in Spain’s urban centers already opened other pathways to wealth and privilege through municipal posts, which created partly autonomous local oligarchies not integrated into a feudal hierarchy. Finally, the revolutionary war itself provided avenues of advancement for soldiers, who were more likely to be promoted up the ranks, regardless of status. Regarding the Church, the Crown gained more power over Church administration with the Concordat of 1753 and undermined its wealth with the desamortization (expropriation and sale) campaign of 1798. By justifying that expropriation in the name of cultivating national wealth, the Crown was also subtly undermining the regime of inherited privilege, as it did when it lifted the ban against noble “labor” (1783), or when it ennobled businessmen and financiers.

Similarly, from the late eighteenth century enlightened thinkers had begun to defend the virtues of merit over privilege, as reflected in their critique of the Castiglione courtier ideal, an elite code of conduct which had applied only to the nobility and was intended to reinforce caste hierarchies. Instead, a new language of civility and urbanity was emerging, an etiquette that could theoretically be followed by all civilized men and women, although it did not appear in codified form until the first conduct manual in 1829. Likewise, the transformation of the legal profession in the late eighteenth century witnessed a new ethos of professionalism and talent that displaced the older “nobles of the robe,” who had been the core of the medieval and early modern profession. From the 1830s, these self-made lawyers would constitute an important chunk of the new liberal political elite.

In addition to the titled nobility, the lower nobles, or hidalgos, constituted approximately 13 percent of the population. Hidalgos had traditionally been prevented from engaging in labor, but when the Crown lifted this ban in 1783, many of them filled the ranks of the middling class of artisans, public administrators, teachers and the liberal professions. Even several of the most eminent statesmen of the late eighteenth century, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, Pedro Rodriguez, the Count of Campomanes and Pablo de Olavide, were born hidalgos. However, just as many hidalgos remained quite poor, especially in those areas of virtual “universal”
nobility, where privilege meant very little and work was a necessity. In these areas, old-regime privileges were eroding even more quickly.

This snapshot of Spanish society in the early nineteenth century confirms the two basic threads of diversity and gradual change. Thus, while on the one hand it was overwhelmingly agricultural and rural, the specific composition and settlement patterns of that agrarian population varied significantly across the peninsula. And while parts of this agrarian society seemed to be steeped in the immobile confines of the old-regime social order, old hierarchies and power structures were already eroding. In some regions nobles and wealthy clergy retained tremendous social and economic power, while in others a diffused nobility did little to maintain social hierarchy. Beyond the agrarian society new categories of people were also expanding beyond the artisan manufacturer of the early modern economy. From factory workers to industrialists, and port workers to merchants, the outlines of a more variegated social order were already visible.

**Culture and Community**

Beyond the basic rhythms of work and survival, how did all these individuals interact with each other and the world around them? For most people, in Spain as elsewhere, their world was constituted by their local community. The combination of poor transportation links and geographical barriers limited physical mobility, while the low literacy rate—about 6 percent in 1797—limited virtual contact via the press as well as any imagined national community for the vast majority of the population. Thus, most cultural transmission was both oral and local, with differences in the urban and rural settings.

In urban settings during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a number of small public spheres emerged in the major towns and cities. Nurtured by a culture of sociability that relied both on physical public spaces like the *plaza mayor* and traditions like the discussion group, or *tertulia*, the mode of transmission was largely oral, the “dramatization of the word” through theatre, songs, images and rumors. From the mid-eighteenth century, the larger towns and cities developed a café culture, where coffee and hot chocolate became the sociable drinks of choice for urban elites. During the brief revolutionary period of 1808–14, these urban public spheres were enhanced with newspapers and broadsides as well as parades and ceremonies invented by local liberal governments to mobilize the populations, but they disappeared with the return of absolutist rule in 1814.

Much more important for the majority of the rural and urban population was the cultural role of the Church in everyday life, which will mark one of the strong continuities across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For many communities, the parish was the center of collective social and cultural, in addition to spiritual (or economic), life. Thus, attending mass was not only a private spiritual affair but a regular opportunity to meet one’s neighbors, as well as a site for oral transmission of culture through the pulpit. In the wealthier parishes, masses were elaborate spectacles, as in the Cathedral in Seville, where multiple daily masses
employed a total staff of 234, including 23 musicians, 20 cantors, 19 chaplains, 36 choirboys and a master of ceremonies. For special festivals, like Holy Week or Corpus Christi, they organized sumptuous processions with tableaux of wood and flowers and live performers acting out the events. Beyond the major holidays, there were 90 annual holy days, not to mention weddings, funerals and baptisms. In addition, each community had unique local fiestas, usually linked to the patron saint of the town, and whether they involved some form of bull baiting, dancing or a community picnic, almost every celebration began with a mass. And, while there was a mixture of the profane and the sacred in many of these festivals, by the eighteenth century the Inquisition’s efforts to root out popular “superstitions” had resulted in a more homogeneous and channeled religious cultural life. With the Church as the primary generator of collective leisure activity, it was the community institution par excellence of the old-regime society.

While to some degree this status continued through the nineteenth century, the Church’s role also began to change in this transitional period. On the one hand, the emergence of other forms of community activities, from the increasingly elaborate bullfight spectacles to the popular militias and the café culture, would begin to undermine the Church’s monopoly on cultural life. Increasing competition was also exacerbated by the weakening of the Church’s own institutions, especially in poorer areas where the huge wealth gap was manifested in poorly educated or even non-existent priests. Thus, in 1797, there were already 3,000 parishes without priests, most of them in the rural south, resulting in a priest to parishioner ratio as high as 1:1700 (vs. 1:153 in parts of the north). On the other hand, the Church’s incorporation into the political struggle between absolutism and liberalism would begin to undermine its unifying role in community life. An important turning point in this process was the 1820–23 liberal interlude, after which the Church increasingly threw in its lot with the absolutists. Confirming this political fault line was the first instance of popular urban anti-clericalism, when crowds burned and sacked religious institutions and forcibly closed monasteries and friaries. After the 1820s, the Church was a primary target of an increasingly mobilized urban working population, all the way through the Civil War of the 1930s.

The evolving and uneven impact of the Church on community life in the early nineteenth century epitomizes the themes of diversity and gradual change. To return to the metaphor of a snapshot of a slowly moving train, the Spanish economy and society was in motion, not a timeless old-regime relic resisting the onset of the modern age. Propelled by a steadily growing population and a more dynamic periphery, the country embarked on a growth trajectory in the mid-eighteenth century that would continue into the nineteenth century. At the same time, the static hierarchies and belief structures of the old-regime society were also loosening, as the influence of aristocracy and clergy declined and the power of wealth was on the rise. However, change was uneven and localized, at least partly due to the weak connecting tissue that kept goods, people and ideas from flowing freely across the peninsula. As a result, there was no uniform or consolidated Spanish economy and society, just an interlinked web of small worlds within the boundaries of a state which was about to undergo a significant political transformation.
Political Crisis, 1808–1814

In the midst of this slowly evolving society, Napoleon’s military challenge opened an acute political crisis of legitimacy for the transatlantic Spanish monarchy, beginning with the coerced abdication of the Bourbon monarchy and the imposition of a new king, Napoleon’s brother Joseph, in 1808–1809. The deeply dislocating impact of the Napoleonic wars was not unique to Spain. It has even been argued that the transforming concept of “total war” that is usually assigned to the First World War should in fact be applied here, not as a result of technological innovation but to acknowledge the increased scope and intensity of warfare that may have produced as many as 5 million deaths across Europe.37

Dynastic Crisis

But while the invasion was a powerful exogenous factor in sparking the outbreak of political revolution in Spain, the unfolding crisis and its resolution owed as much to internal factors as to external. Thus, as in France before 1789, the deposed monarch’s legitimacy had already been undermined in previous years as a result of a growing financial crisis and its impact on the population, particularly elite sectors. The Spanish monarchy tried to recover revenue with a series of unpopular policies, which included raising taxes on nobles and expropriating some of the Church’s vast holdings, but frustration with these measures was aimed at the king’s upstart minister, Manuel de Godoy. As in the French version of the crisis, royal financial incompetence was transformed into a moral and then political indictment. In Spain, however, there was a savior within the royal family, the king’s son, Ferdinand. With the support of powerful noble and clerical interests, he conspired to oust Godoy, but many, including his father, thought he was plotting to overthrow the king himself.

There is no question that Napoleon took advantage of this sordid dynastic drama to try to bring Spain into his military and political orbit. French troops had been in Spain since October of 1807, purportedly en route to invade Portugal and protect Spain from the British, but in March of 1808 Napoleon ordered 50,000 troops to march on Madrid. At the same time, Ferdinand and his supporters sought to take advantage of the French troops to force his father to fire Godoy. In the so-called “revolt of Aranjuez,” at the summer palace of the royal family, an insurrection among royal guards snowballed into the abdication of Charles IV on March 18, 1808.

Ferdinand and his supporters welcomed the French troops, hoping they would endorse his coup, but Napoleon invited both father and son to meet privately with him to resolve their dispute. Rumors that Ferdinand and his father were in fact being held prisoner by Napoleon sparked the first revolt against the French troops in Madrid on May 2, an event immortalized by the painter Goya in his epic paintings, “Dos de Mayo” and “Tres de Mayo,” the second of which portrayed the execution of Spanish resisters by a French firing squad. Similar insurrections broke out across the peninsula. On May 20 the rumors of kidnaping were confirmed by the news that Charles and Ferdinand had abdicated their rights to the throne to Napoleon, and on May 24 the first insurrectionary junta (council) in Oviedo (Asturias) declared war on Napoleon.
War and Resistance

What happened after this moment has been subject to varying interpretations, but what is indisputable is that, for the next six years, Spain was immersed in a brutal war that made it the site of the “most merciless conflict in Europe” since the French state crushed a peasant rebellion in the Vendée in the 1790s. The war and resistance were marked by direct and indirect violence, with the French occupying and pillaging towns and villages. Over the course of the war, towns and villages were invaded and liberated multiple times, accompanied not only by more fighting and “pacification,” but also destruction of bridges, roads and buildings to prevent their use by the enemy.

Beyond the death and devastation, what was at stake in this war? On one level, it was an international war between France and Britain, the so-called “Peninsular War” starring the Duke of Wellington and his army, in which Spain appears as little more than the territory on which the two foreign giants settled their bid for European supremacy. In this international story, what Napoleon called the “Spanish ulcer” contributed to the shattering of his imperial ambitions by tying down large numbers of his troops and resources in an unwinnable quagmire. The Duke of Wellington and his British-led victories certainly clinched the defeat of the French armies, but most historians now agree that the Spanish guerrilla forces played a key role by dissipating the concentration of the French troops, who were kept busy pacifying guerrilla strongholds.

Within Spain, the motives and identities of guerrillas and other participants were much more varied. In contrast to simplistic interpretations that have identified the uprising against the French as a war of national independence, or, conversely, as the reactionary resistance of backward peasants fueled by fanatical clerics, recent interpretations have argued that the war was not about or between “two Spains,” one modern and the other traditional.

Instead, the war opened a liminal moment defined by the weakened legitimacy and defense of the existing social and political order. Some of the actors who flooded into this vacuum were responding to the larger legitimacy crisis, but others were focused on more local issues, either protecting existing interests or expressing discontent with the status quo. Thus, on the popular level, there were anti-tax protests, consumer riots, occupation of land and refusal to pay seigneurial dues. In some regions, tight community bonds and resistance to the
centralizing state provided the resources to mount significant guerrilla armies. Other popular motives included defense of the Church and the Catholic religion against the “atheist” French revolutionaries, as well as a more general hostility towards the French. The brutal pacification tactics pursued by the French occupiers further inflamed this hostility. It is likely that very little of the popular insurrection was motivated either by Spanish nationalism or by political ideology, either liberal or absolutist.  

On the elite level, the picture is different but equally murky. While elites may have been more aware of the implications of the legitimacy crisis, they were divided as to how to resolve it. Indeed, in acknowledgment of deep elite divisions, one of the prominent Spanish intellectuals of the time, Jovellanos, called the conflict a “civil” war. In particular, while Jovellanos supported the resistance against the French, other “enlightened” intellectuals, the afrancesados, took up positions with the occupying French government, attracted by Joseph’s promises of modernizing reforms and public order. Indeed, the new French administration proclaimed the principles of equality before the law in a new constitution approved by a small group of Spanish delegates convoked by the French in Bayonne on July 8, 1808, and, in a series of decrees, abolished feudal privileges and the Inquisition.  

The Cortes of Cádiz and the Constitution of 1812

In contrast to the collaborators, the anti-French liberals and reformers, among other “patriots,” as they were known, participated in the local and regional insurrections and were key protagonists in the provincial juntas that sprang up spontaneously to fill the vacuum of power left by the collapsing Spanish state. In the attempt to coordinate resistance, these local juntas eventually transformed into a Junta Central (September 25, 1808). In order to resolve the crisis of sovereignty, on May 22, 1809, the Junta Central convoked the election of the Cortes Generales, or parliament, a representative body that had existed in various medieval kingdoms, including Castile. It was the Cortes which convened in Cádiz between 1810 and 1813 that defined the struggle against the French in the name of the sovereignty of the Spanish nation and, as the representative of that nation, abolished the structures of the absolutist regime.  

Its crowning achievement was the Constitution of 1812. This document would serve as the rallying cry for the liberal revolution for the next several decades, not only in Spain but in Portugal and Italy and throughout Spanish America. The document established a constitutional monarchy (to be led by Ferdinand VII when he returned to Spain) whose legitimacy lay in the sovereignty of the nation. It mandated a division of powers with significant limits on the executive, and a unicameral Cortes that would be elected by universal male suffrage and would have significant control of such thorny issues as taxation. The basic liberal principle of equality before the law was accompanied by all the civil liberties except freedom of religion, and by the destruction of all corporate privileges. Equality before the law also included a unitary system of courts and tariffs, as well as the reorganization of the state into uniform provinces. In separate decrees, the Cortes also abolished the Inquisition and feudal seigneurial rights, and began to expropriate more lands held by the Church and the nobility for sale to private owners.
A Spanish “Constitutional Culture”

The sweeping liberal agenda launched by the Cortes of Cádiz and the 1812 Constitution has been at the heart of debates about the “two Spains.” In recent years, most scholars have realized that the sterile argument over whether the liberalism of the Cortes of Cádiz was indigenous or imitative was fueled by an ahistorical monolithic view of “liberalism.” Once it was evaluated, not as it measured up to the French model, but as a product of its own transatlantic context, or its “constitutional culture,” it could be viewed as a regional variant, not a pale imitation, of the original. The unique elements that emerged at Cádiz included the protection of religious unity, a focus on the community rights of the nation rather than the rights of individuals, and the reliance on tradition and history as a source of legitimation. Intellectual sources for this culture can be found in various eighteenth-century currents of thought which, when placed within the particular crisis of 1808, resolve the apparent paradoxes in the Cortes’ deliberations and pronouncements.

In particular, the most discussed difference between Spanish and French liberalism was the role of religion. For a long time scholars struggled to understand what seemed to be the incomprehensible defense of Catholic unity in the 1812 Constitution, in contrast to the militant secularism of the “authentic” French version. In fact, liberal historians often tried to square this circle by distinguishing between “pure” liberalism and a tactical acceptance of religious unity to appeal to conservative sectors in the Cortes and a devout population.

What has emerged recently is a more historicized portrait of a transatlantic Hispanic constitutional culture that accepted religion rather than excised it. Thus, this concept of the “Catholic nation” was not unique to Spain’s constitutional culture but was present in all the major Hispanic constitutional experiments in the early nineteenth-century Atlantic world. The apparent paradox of the “Catholic nation” is a product of the false dichotomy between the nation as inherently secular and religion as fused to the old regime. In fact liberals embraced Catholicism as a key element of Spanish national identity, and many Catholics, especially among the 30 percent of clerical representatives in the Cortes, embraced this liberal view of the nation. While there were anti-liberal clerics, the “Catholic public sphere” was not united in fanatical conservatism but reflected a plurality of views. The image of a monolithic reactionary Catholic sector that was propagated at the time by Anglophile liberals like José María Blanco White drew more on the trope of Spanish religious fanaticism going back to the sixteenth century than to empirical observation.

Consistent with the 1812 Constitution’s harmonizing of nation and religion was its legitimation of national sovereignty in Spanish history and tradition instead of the “rights of man.” Thus, the Cortes framed the constitution as a recuperation of medieval liberties that had been lost during the period of absolutist rule. As deputy and historian Francisco Martínez Marina put it, they were “re-establishing laws which had made our ancestors free men.” In sum, the legitimation of national sovereignty in tradition was both a response to the practical crisis of 1808 and a product of the Spanish enlightenment.

On a practical level, the historicist claims of the Cortes helped combat the universalist claims of the occupying Napoleonic government. In trying to make the
case that the Napoleonic monarchy was an illegitimate authority in Spain, the Cortes created a “particularist” constitution that was rooted in its own history rather than natural law. Likewise, the Cortes’ claim to represent the new sovereign subject of the “nation” can in part be read as a practical response to the abdication of the Bourbon monarch. In contrast to the Napoleonic claim that sovereignty had been transferred from one monarchical house to another, which was not unusual in the early modern period, the Cortes of Cádiz made the claim to independence through creating a new sovereign subject, the nation. Finally, this practical need to justify independence also favored a defense of the nation as a single unit rather than the natural rights of individuals.

At the same time that the 1812 Constitution was a response to the specific crisis of sovereignty, its ideas were also rooted in the intellectual debates of the previous decades, in Spain’s version of the Enlightenment. It has been many decades since Spain’s participation in the Enlightenment was “rediscovered,” but the links between these ideas and the Cortes of Cádiz have not been fully explored until recently.

Even though there was no explicit political theory of the sovereign nation, there were a number of strands of thought in the late eighteenth century that constituted the building blocks of the constitutional debates of 1810–1812. Thus, discussions of political economy, juridical thought, historiography and moral philosophy were all indirectly exploring the relationship between the monarch and society. The ideas of the “political” realm as a site where rights could be defended, and of a “constitution” as a political document articulating those rights, took shape during the last third of the eighteenth century among the enlightened thinkers working within the framework of the absolutist monarchy.51

One other crucial aspect of the historical context in which the Spanish liberal and national revolution took shape was the imperial character of the Spanish monarchy and its legitimacy crisis. Whereas concepts of nation and liberalism were once viewed as developing in parallel fashion on both sides of the Spanish Atlantic, recent studies have emphasized a shared transatlantic discourse about sovereignty, nationhood and liberalism that was still focused more on the reform of the Spanish monarchy rather than on its dissolution.

Indeed, perhaps the most striking innovation of the 1812 Constitution was the declaration that sovereignty lay in all Spaniards of both hemispheres who were born free, thus becoming the first European state to extend membership in the nation beyond the metropole. Before then, the Junta Central had already issued its famous declaration in January of 1809 that the American territories were not mere colonies but “essential parts” of the Spanish nation, and invited those territories to send representatives. Thus, the Cortes of Cádiz was faced with the double task of transferring sovereignty from the monarch to the nation and of defining the transatlantic boundaries of that nation.

The Cortes hoped it could make the transition from composite monarchy to nation without losing those overseas territories. Indeed, at first most of the American representatives and the elites back home were more invested in articulating how they could be integrated on an equal basis into the new nation rather than in separating from it.52 It was the failure of this integration that turned American reformers into separatist nationalists who pushed for independence.
from Spain, but the question of exactly when this happened is still unresolved. Some have blamed the limits of the Cortes of 1812, while others see the reactionary policies of Ferdinand VII after 1814 as crucial, while still others insist that only during the next liberal revolution of 1820 were the cords cut for good.

Those who lay the blame on the Cortes rightly point out that the 1812 Constitution failed to transform the rhetoric of equality into practice. Thus, the Cortes deliberately excluded African slaves and mixed race people with African heritage, both to ensure a numerical majority for the peninsula and as a result of deeply rooted beliefs about racial inequality. The Constitution was also silent on the question of both slavery and the slave trade, reflecting an implicit agreement with creole planter elites in Cuba not to touch the institution in return for their continued loyalty to Spain. But while it is true that the peninsular Spaniards never really imagined even the creole colonials as equals, let alone the indigenous and African populations, the gap between liberal rhetoric and practice was not unique to Spain, especially when it came to colonial empires. Rather than serving as an example of the faulty or weak liberalism of the Cortes, in fact the contradiction between abstract inclusion and practical exclusion would be one of the defining features of nineteenth-century European liberalism.

As this last point makes clear, the process of situating the Spanish revolution in the specific context of Spanish history does not isolate it from the larger narrative of the “age of revolutions.” Thus, while recent scholarship has convincingly situated the Constitution of 1812 at the intersection between Spanish intellectual currents of the late eighteenth century and the specific elements of the crisis of 1808, it was not a uniquely Spanish product. For example, the key role that religion played in national identity was not confined to the Hispanic world. In recent decades, historians of Britain and Germany, among others, have made the case that religion remained an important part of “modern” national identity throughout the nineteenth century, so that religion and nation no longer seem fixed on either side of some arbitrary modern/traditional divide.

Likewise, the appeal to tradition instead of natural rights drew on a significant current of liberal constitutional thought based on the English revolution of 1688, which continued to serve as an alternative pole to the French rupture model in the nineteenth century. In addition, the focus on the community of the nation over the rights of individuals will mark a significant divide, not between Spain and Europe, but between Anglo-Saxon and continental constitutional thought in the coming decades. The point is that there was no monolithic liberal and national revolution that the Cortes and its constitution either measured up to or fell short of.

The End of the Revolutionary Era

Even accepting that the Cortes of Cádiz and its constitution represented an authentically Spanish version of a liberal revolution, there is no question that its authority was precarious from the outset and that the chances of the Constitution of 1812 being implemented were slim at best. The French still occupied most of the peninsula in 1812, with their last major victory in Valencia in January, and even as the French armies were pushed north, the Cádiz government had few resources to restore order, let alone transform institutions, in the “liberated” areas.
Even in the French areas, the situation for local populations was deteriorating rapidly, as Napoleon began withdrawing more troops for his Russian campaign and the remaining ones were increasingly hobbled by guerrilla forays. In the British-led offensive of May 1813, French troops had to abandon Madrid, and, after a significant military victory by Wellington’s army at Vitoria on June 21st, only Catalonia remained in French hands by the summer of 1813.

Such chaos helped fuel a revival of absolutist opposition, which was a minority in the Cortes of Cádiz but emerged as a strong sector of the first regular elected parliament that opened in October of 1813. The absolutist cause was bolstered by Napoleon’s release of Ferdinand VII, who returned to Spain on March 24, 1814. In Valencia, he was presented with a petition signed by the 69 absolutist Cortes deputies, the so-called “Manifesto of the Persians,” asking Ferdinand to overturn the Constitution of 1812 and restore the pre-1808 political and social order. When General Javier de Elio, a commander in the Spanish army, pledged to support Ferdinand in this task, the king agreed. The royal decree issued in Valencia abolished the constitution and everything promulgated by the Cortes, “as if such things had never happened,” and by May Elio’s troops had occupied Madrid. With Napoleon’s abdication on April 6, it was clear that the revolutionary era in Spain, as well as Europe, had come to a close.

**Conclusion**

While marking the closure of the revolutionary era, the reinstatement of absolutism in Spain, as across continental Europe, also opened a new era of political struggle. Within less than a decade in Spain, and a few years later in France, liberalism would re-emerge as the major political challenge and alternative of the first half of the nineteenth century. Between the poles of a central and eastern Europe where absolutist regimes largely survived this challenge, and the British and Belgian model defined by gradual political change, lay the Spanish and French cases of open and discontinuous political struggle in which old-regime absolutism was finally defeated by the 1840s. Even though the liberal revolution that was consolidated in Spain lacked the democratic features of the 1812 Constitution, including any pretense of colonial equality, it was clear that 1812—bolstered by a pre-existing constitutional culture—had changed the terms of political debate, altering the parameters of what could be imagined in Spain’s nineteenth-century political culture.

At the same time, the nineteenth-century political transition from absolutism to liberalism that defines the “western” European model did not entail a wholesale transformation from an “old regime” society and economy to a “modern” one. Thus, from the late eighteenth century, there were ongoing tensions between “traditional” structures and hierarchies and emerging “modern” ones that extended well into the nineteenth century, with no unified or predetermined links between the political transition and changes in other spheres. For Spain, as for the rest of Europe, then, the revolutionary era does not mark a clear rupture. Instead of the bourgeois revolution that swept away the old economic, political and social order
in one fell swoop, changes in these spheres occurred at different rhythms, followed distinct trajectories and produced a variety of outcomes. With no master trajectory of “modernization,” historians have the task of uncovering the specific historical circumstances that shaped the narrative of change and continuity in each country.

Within this murkier narrative of modernity, in what sense does Spain’s modern era begin in 1808? While any specific year remains in some ways an arbitrary designation for the beginning of a new historical era, 1808 functions as a useful turning point in Spanish history. Without having to make the case for a complete rupture, it is clear that the broader “crisis of sovereignty” opened a liminal moment in western European and Atlantic history that challenged existing political structures and institutions, introduced new claims into the political vocabulary, and overturned old regimes that, even if “restored,” had inevitably lost some of their previous legitimacy. And, while Spain’s 1808 crisis of sovereignty was undoubtedly sparked by the external impetus of French invasion, the version of a new politics that emerged in Cádiz was firmly rooted in the intellectual and social currents of Spanish culture and history, as evidenced by its impact in reframing political debates for the rest of the century. If the “birth” of modern Europe is defined by the rupture of crisis rather than definitive or implicitly progressive transformation, then 1808 can serve as Spain’s point of entry into the modern world.