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James Simpson and Juan Carmona, *Why Democracy Failed: The Agrarian Origins of the Spanish Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 316 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-72038-0.

With this book's provocative title, the authors demand agrarian history a seat at the table in the debates regarding the collapse of Spanish liberal democracy in 1936 and the outbreak of civil war. It is in rural Spain, they contend, that we can identify the reasons 'why moderate and often apolitical Spaniards became disillusioned [...] and then attracted to [...] extremist policies' (p. 1). Rather than the classic perspectives which emphasize the intransigence of the traditional elites or the radicalization of the left, the authors argue that the failure of the Second Republic (1931-1936) lies in the fact that 'small farmers had been unable to organize sufficiently to advance their own political interests' (p. 3).

Part I of the book explores economic and political shifts across Europe from 1870 to 1939. The authors conduct an impressive comparative survey of interdisciplinary literature on the processes of economic modernization, state development, and democratization (or its opposite) in European countries during this period. With particular relevance for their argument regarding Spain, they highlight the work of political scientists such as Gregory Luebbert in emphasizing the important role of small family farmers and their political decisions as a determinant of democratization or authoritarianism. As Jules Ferry said of the France's third republic, so the authors say of Spain's second one: it had to be a peasants' republic, or it would perish. The authors also point to the particular significance of 'state capacity' as a factor of democratic consolidation, as it is through its ability to serve voters' interests and implement its own promises that the state develops legitimacy. The First World War, from which Spain abstained, was the key event underpinning the growth in state capacity for many Western European countries.

Over Parts II and III, the authors bring Spain's specificities during this period into focus. The Restoration era (1874-1931) saw economic development, with Spain narrowly closing the living standards gap on its wealthier European neighbors on several measures, but Spanish 'modernization' had its limits. Despite significant agricultural development in some respects — including on many large estates, contrary to the contemporary (and enduring) stereotype of decadence and inefficiency — low output and productivity plagued the Spanish rural economy overall, at least partly due to political choices such as tariffs favoring large landowners and little

investment in agricultural research (which in other countries was compelled by the shortages of the First World War). In a mainly arid country, technological innovation could overcome the challenges of dry farming, but this was not always available to smaller and more geographically fragmented family farms in the absence of cooperatives to help them adapt. Unproductive farms also could not absorb surplus urban labor at times of rising unemployment. Despite some improvements, Spanish workers and small farmers therefore continued to experience generally 'poor and precarious' (p. 100) living standards.

The 'modernization' of Spain's political system also concealed dangerous structural flaws. Although the Restoration brought a semblance of peace and stability after a long period of contestation of the nineteenth-century liberal revolution, the 'Achilles heel' (p. 65) of this pseudo-democratic, oligarchic system was its inability to incorporate the demands of new social actors. It is well established that this meant that grievances on both left and right fueled anti-liberal, anti-democratic, or – in Catalonia and the Basque country – separatist political ideas. However, here the authors also emphasize that in the absence of real political competition, the landed elites and the Church were not incentivized to develop a mass politics for the peasantry, as occurred elsewhere, leaving small farmers largely unrepresented (a notable exception was Catalonia, where competitive regional politics did lead to efforts to mobilize agricultural voters – both in the conservative *Liga* and the republican *Esquerra*). Persistent corruption and clientelism were also both symptom and cause of a lack of state capacity and the failure to develop rational, impersonal mechanisms to implement government policies at local level – in particular, taxation and expenditure and the obtaining of accurate information about the agricultural economy. On this point it would, perhaps, have been useful to see a more direct engagement with the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923-30) which did, after all, at least *claim* to be confronting some of these issues, such as the clientelist system of *caciquismo* and the weakness of Spanish national identity.

As Parts IV and V show, the sum total of these factors was the bequest, to the democratic experiment which followed the Restoration, of a socioeconomic, political, and administrative context inimical to the consolidation of stable democratic norms. This was especially acute during an economic crisis of the kind that greeted the Second Republic at the beginning of the 1930s. A lack of state capacity hampered the effectiveness of measures such as minimum farm prices which might have improved the social outlook and enhanced the Republic's legitimacy. Many of these factors – along with simple geography – also hindered the Republic's ability to implement its much-heralded land reform; this failure, and the crucial absence of a moderate Christian Democracy in Spain, 'offered political opportunities for both the Left and Right [...], polarizing village society, and, in time, undermining democracy' (p. 180). The authors thus look to de-emphasize the determinant role of radical ideologies, instead looking to the broader structural context which first impeded the growth of moderate, democratic political parties in rural Spain and in turn gave the radical left and right the space to flourish.

Overall, this is an ambitious work which attempts to combine a complex, nuanced, comparative and at times rather technical agrarian history of Spain with analysis of the country's governmental and political situation in terms of its ripeness for democratization. At times the

links between the authors' different arguments can be difficult to trace through these multiple objectives – especially for a reader unspecialized in agrarian history (bearing in mind the authors' aim of bringing the agrarian perspective more firmly into view in the mainstream historiography of 1930s Spain). However, the book makes multiple useful contributions. Although an early likening of President Niceto Alcalá-Zamora's decision not to appoint Gil Robles as Prime Minister of Spain in 1935 to David Cameron's decision to call a referendum on UK membership of the European Union in 2016 hints at an overzealous approach to comparisons, this proves an unfounded concern. In fact, the comparative perspective offers an incisive tool for analyzing Spain's specific experiences without resorting to essentialist generalizations: like any national history, Spain's trajectory emerged through a confluence of geographical, socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors and had both similarities and differences with other countries. The authors have also added to our understanding that the Spanish Civil War was not, at least at the outset, a binary political division, but rather the multidirectional crumbling and fragmentation of a fragile social order. Finally, they have brought a key social group, the small farmers, back into the frame. In so doing, they have highlighted how the historiography on the politics of the Second Republic has often mirrored the same preoccupations –and exclusions – as the political discourse of the time.

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