

How the Absent Renaissance Became Baroque in Castile (And Why This Should Matter to Us)

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Abstract: From the point of view of political history [as Machiavelli had well understood], no European society became “modern” earlier than that of Castile and Aragón. This had to do with a comparatively early emergence of roles of “Subjectivity” in those kingdoms. But different from Italy, above all, and later on from Germany, the emergence of Subjectivity in Castile and Aragón did not go along with a programmatic revision of social and [to be] “scientific” knowledge [proof being that the “rediscovery of classical Antiquity” always remained a secondary concern in Spain]. As a consequence [and as, for example, the basic structure of the Picaresque novel shows], two worlds and spheres of action, that of – modern – politics and that of – a very conservative – religious and cultural life, were kept strictly apart. But while this separation was also experienced as a dimension of potential strategic manoeuvring, it would increasingly turn into a new conception of life and of the universe, into an intellectual practice of oscillation between two different ontological realms, during the 17th century, yielding what we have come to call “Golden Age culture” or “Spanish Baroque” [think of the “play between different worlds” in Cervantes’ “Quijote” or of Calderón’s “Gran teatro del mundo”]. Taking place between the late 15th and the mid 17th centuries, this eccentric story offers a different and particularly complex understanding of the period concepts “Renaissance” and “Baroque.”

Key-Words: Emergence of Subjectivity; Political, Religious and Cultural Life; Absent Renaissance as Baroque in Castile.

To rethink and to analyze our present from a fresh perspective, based on innovative views of the historical period we call “Renaissance,” seems to be the agenda of this colloquium – and needless to say, if the confrontation with a new image of Renaissance has a potential of changing how we see and think of the present, then this

same confrontation will also further develop the ways in which we can understand Renaissance and Early Modernity. Two things, I believe, are remarkable about the project that has brought us together. In the first place, the agenda looks quite exceptional within a contemporary intellectual environment that has become very skeptical about the possibilities “to learn from the past.” But what we are up to, I suppose, is less to learn “substantial lessons” from past worlds than to use the immersion into the past as a source for our conceptual imagination. Secondly, the historical period of preference that we use as a contrast and as a tool for our understanding of the present is Enlightenment and not Renaissance. Now, the substitution suggested may well be motivated by the impression [or should I rather say: by the “bet”] that a reconsideration of Renaissance may offer us a sharper, a more “Nietzschean” notion of Rationality, a notion of Rationality freed from many Enlightenment connotations with their sometimes unbearably good intentions, such as an all-too optimistic image of humankind, an often self-congratulatory ideology of progress, and a tendency towards overly pedagogical [not to say “preacherly”] tones of argumentation.

In the context of this doubly eccentric primary approach, it probably comes as a further surprise if, with so many different national contexts at hand, I want to concentrate on Renaissance in Spain or, more precisely, on the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries in Castilian culture. For neither is there much of a “rebirth” of classical Greek and Roman learning to be found on the Iberian Peninsula, nor do I have any apologetic ambition to prove the opposite, i.e. that Castile, like any other “respectable” Western culture, developed a full-fledged Renaissance period. On the contrary, I want to focus – from an un-ideologically “Hegelian” distance of abstraction -- on the [almost] non-existing Castilian Renaissance because I believe that this very absence of a culture deserving the name of “Renaissance,” that the contrast which such a void may produce when compared to other regional [or “national”] situations, and that its main historical consequence, i.e. the emergence of a particularly impressive Baroque culture in Castile, will all help us to understand something about the nature of modern Rationality that we would not have access to otherwise. In order to get to this point, I will pursue the three following questions: What exactly are the symptoms for the absence of “Renaissance” in Castile? What can we learn from this eccentric case for the larger context of early

European Modernity? How, finally, can our insights about early Castilian and, coming from there, about early European Modernity help us to see our own present in a more complex way?

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Partly at least as a result of the dominance of Islamic culture during the medieval centuries, there was not much substantial knowledge from ancient Greek and ancient Roman letters available to be recycled and “reborn” on the Iberian Peninsula. Competent scholars and authors like the early 16th century grammarian Nebrija were the rare exception in Spain whereas, much more frequently, the scarcity of “classical” letters and learning became the laughing stock of erudite circles in France and, above all, in Italy. But despite this blatant lack of Renaissance learning, the Castilian kingdom [in particular during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs that spanned from the late 15th and to the early 16th century] became the first “modern State” in the sense proper. This is not just a historians’ judgment but was the dominant impression among the contemporaries of Fernando de Aragón and Isabel de Castilla. When Niccolo Machiavelli asked himself, in the XXIst chapter of “Il Principe,” whether there was any politician in his own time that lived up to the normative image that he had drawn, he pointed, without any hesitation or ambiguity, to Fernando de Aragón, and he did so for two very interesting [perhaps even surprising] reasons. In the first place, Machiavelli believed that Fernando was the only politician of his time able to use “religion as a coat beneath which to hide his intentions.” Something similar, he added, was true for the speed with which Fernando performed all military actions – for this speed seemed to confuse his enemies. We can see that what made Fernando a distinctively modern politician in Machiavelli’s eyes was the capacity to use his body and the physical side of his actions in order to keep all kinds of intentions and strategies hidden. This, as I will try to explain, presupposed a frame of mind that, today, we tend to associate with the emergence of modern subjecthood. And there are plenty of other anecdotes from the reign of the Catholic Monarchs that could that we call “Baroque.” illustrate the reasons for Machiavelli’s admiration, even without being explicitly mentioned in his treatise. When, for example, Columbus first presented his project of finding a new, supposedly shorter way towards India to the royal couple, they received the correct expertise from

their advisors, i.e. that Columbus' claim was based on erroneous computations. But as soon the Queen, in the early 1490s, received unexpected tax income, she decided that the potential gain of the – unlikely but, in her view, not completely impossible – discovery would be considerable enough to justify the risk of failure and lost investment. Such “calculated risk,” as a specific figure of subjective judgment, was another configuration of mind and of action bound to become decisive for modern politics.

Now, what I believe made the Castilian situation profoundly different from early modern culture in other European contexts, was the strict separation of such subject-based judgment and behavior from the symbolic and above all from the religious dimensions of society. Since the Council of Trent, in the middle of the 16th century, the Spanish Crown and indeed [if the concept is not anachronistic here] the entire Spanish Nation deliberately and programmatically understood their cosmological [rather than their “historical”] mission to lie in the defense of the traditional doctrine and institutions of Christianity, against the rise of Protestantism and its allies. With never failing consequence, this collective determination was kept at a distance from the developing culture of subject-based praxis. The literary genre of the picaresque novel that first articulated itself, emblematically enough, during the first years after the Council of Trent, was clearly inspired by a new life form capable of oscillating between two separated institutional and existential spheres. On the one hand, Lazarillo de Tormes, the earliest picaresque title hero, manages to survive by turning everyday situations to his material advantage, often with brutal cynicism and ruthlessly neglecting all social and religious norms of behavior. But, not unlike Fernando de Aragón in his military and political action, he is on the other hand well capable of hiding his subjective goals and ambitions under a “coat” of rule-obeying behavior. In full awareness of the deal implied, Lazarillo marries and thus gives legitimacy to an archpriest's concubine because this [potentially humiliating] situation buys him the protection and support of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

For all we know, the anonymous text of the first picaresque novel was very successful in making this situation transparent to its readers, without ever explicitly mentioning [at least in the text's original version] what they were supposed to discover as the “truth” of Lazarillo's life, behind his treacherous [and slightly overstated]

autobiographical discourse. What we can discover in this genre, with admiration and aesthetic enjoyment, is a reflex and a resonance of the historical everyday competence to shift between different worlds, between the symbolic world of Church and religion, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the mostly ruthless world of subjective interest. Every picaresque novel shows us how each of these two dimensions, when in touch with the other, disillusions and undoes it. While Lazarillo takes care of his own interest, he is in complete denial of all religious norms; but when plays his role of a pawn within the world of the Church, he is obliged to bracket all individual interest. There is a contemporary pair of concepts, the concepts of “engano” and “desengano,” that captures this specific tension.

Without any doubt, the early modern and specifically Spanish separation between a “subjective” practical world and an “objective” symbolic world was the – much overlooked -- basis from which the powerful ontological tension between immanent Reality and transcendental Reality that we call “Baroque” arose and began to spread all over Europe. It was the cultural frame that made Spanish culture, so to speak, world-famous -- and that was foundational for its “Golden Age.” Perhaps the aesthetic appeal of Baroque and its potential philosophical complexity has never been further developed than in Pedro Calderón’s “Gran teatro del mundo.” But the grandiose juxtaposition of Immanence and Transcendence that shaped this play and became constitutive for Baroque culture at large also implied a specific inherent limitation. As, in their oscillation, the different worlds of the picaresque hero undo each other, baroque Immanence and Transcendence turn out to be mutually limiting in their juxtaposition. Philosophical thought, for example, could only thrive in Castile under the condition that it was staged as theology, while the static understanding of the world as divine creation, as a creation with specific and stable values attached to all kinds of phenomena, may have been the reason why the administrators of the Spanish Crown, with devastating long-term consequences, never understood the self-reflexivity of precious metal [and of money] and thereby the perilous mechanisms of inflation.

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What we have seen so far, through the eccentric case of Castilian Early Modernity and what we could easily supplement with more historical evidence, is the

insight that the emergence of post-medieval rationality did not – at least not primarily -- depend on the “rebirth” [or on the rediscovery] of classical letters, however prominent this effect may have become in our view of early modern cultures outside Spain. Much more foundational was a new type of human self-reference, the one we have come to call “subjecthood,” in which early modern thinkers could conceive of themselves as purely spiritual outside observers of the material world who believed to discover “profound” meanings “beneath” or “behind” the “purely material surface” of the world of objects. With the human body being seen as belonging to this world of objects, it also became possible to invert the process of interpretation [i.e. the discovery of meaning “behind” matter] and use the body as a screen behind which to hide intentions and thoughts. This, at least according to Machiavelli, was one of the more salient features of the new type of Rationality. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to say where this new culture of Subjectivity [or of “metaphysics,” i.e. of that which “goes beyond the merely material dimension”] came from. Most probably, it emerged in reaction to a dramatically growing complexity of the early modern world. But while explanations of this type have an inevitable tendency of looking tautological, the Castilian situation at least makes it at least clear that Subjectivity was not a legacy from classical Antiquity.

Likewise, early modern Castilian culture shows how a new construction of time did not exclusively depend on a changed relationship between the present and the remote classical past, a relationship in which the classical past was bound to become normative for the present. Rather, the early modern construction of time in Spain mostly continued to shape itself against the threat of a future, which, in principle, appeared to be inaccessible. On the side of the past, however, the emerging Subject position allowed for a more selective attitude, an attitude that would not necessarily give preference to the worlds of Greece and Rome. For while, in medieval times, any knowledge from the past had appeared to contain valuable lessons, the early modern perspective on time predominant in Castile was one of selection and choice, of selection and choice that quite often included and thus affirmed memories from the immediately preceding medieval times.

Thirdly, after the emergence of Subjectivity and its new relation to the past, what perhaps characterizes Early Modernity in Castile more than any other feature, is that strict mutual isolation and limitation of influence between Immanence and

Transcendence. Not every kind of knowledge was open to revision from the Subject perspective during the 14th or 15th century in Castile, and this limitation reminds us that, in other cultural contexts too, the fully unfolded Enlightenment projects were much slower in coming than we sometimes tend to imagine today. Christian religion, as the still dominant horizon of the early modern world, may have been more protected against critique and revision in Spain than anywhere else in Europe, but this does of course not mean that religion outside Spain became soon dispensable. In some cases and from some perspectives, it did take modern culture in Spain longer to shake off its early modern [rather than its medieval] limitations. But similar limitations had also existed outside Spain. Only the 17th century in central and Northern Europe, only the transition between Baroque and early Enlightenment began to achieve an irreversibly growing distance towards the traditional horizons of Transcendence.

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And what can be the contribution of focusing on Early Modernity, more specifically: on Early Modernity in Castile, for the understanding of our own present? For the longest time, as I said at the beginning of this reflection, the age of Enlightenment was considered the both foundational and normative frame for our contemporary self-reference. During a more recent past, however, we have become quite skeptical about Enlightenment values and concepts. It was in the mid-20th century – Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s polemical “Dialectics of Enlightenment” may be seen as an intellectual threshold in this sense – that we began to perceive the process and the project of “Modernity” as a problematic one-way street towards ever growing abstraction. Meanwhile, the overwhelming impact of electronic technology has transformed our predominant everyday reality in a fusion between consciousness and software, devoid of any contact with the physical world and without an obvious place or function of the human body. As a reaction to “dis-enchantment” as the law of Modernization, there are influential intellectual voices today that are looking for possibilities of a “rational re-enchantment,” as a mode of resistance and correction.

This may explain why historically earlier stages in the emergence of modern Rationality, stages preceding the age of Enlightenment, have gained new appeal and fascination for us. What, for example, makes Machiavelli’s description of Fernando de

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Aragón as the first modern politician so particularly interesting is that, different from politics in our own times, it implies and even highlights an active -- although undeniably rational -- role of his body in the process of political action. Perhaps we are even tempted by the closeness of this very early Rationality to physical violence -- although it might be a good thing that a strong ethical taboo makes us hesitant to admit that much. As for our contemporary construction of time, it is obvious that, for perhaps as much as half a century now, we have abandoned the 19th century type of spirit of progress heading towards a future that presented itself as an open horizon of possibilities -- although we have not yet developed a new discourse that allows us to speak and to think about this different flux of time with new concepts. The future of the early 21st century has become an inaccessible and threatening future again, whereas -- not unlike Early Modernity -- we feel wide open towards a multi-layered past, instead of believing that we can leave the past behind ourselves. On this level, too, the courage and the judgment that we need to make choices among the multiple paradigms offered by the past is something that we can re-learn from Early Modernity -- and if "re-learning" is, perhaps, too strong and too optimistic a concept, early modern temporality may at least convince us that our loss of the temporality of progress is not synonymous with an absolute implosion of time.

But the most uncanny historical similarity between Early Modernity and our present [and I do of course not make any implications here about "laws" or "regularities" obliging History to repeat itself] may well lie in that juxtaposition and oscillation between two different existential dimensions that we have identified as specific for the 15th, 16th, and 17th century in Spain. Obviously, since the late 19th century the latest, the everyday in most Western cultures no longer switches between pragmatic rationality and religiously grounded and sanctioned forms of behavior. What has emerged, however, in reaction to the professional life sphere of an increasingly global middle class that constitutes itself at the intersection between consciousness and software, is an expanding world of leisure that brings the human body and its senses back into play. Perhaps to say that our contemporary culture of leisure brings the human body "back into play" is a somehow inadequate way of describing this situation. For there are good reasons to believe that, to the extent in which we constitute a world -- perhaps even a true ontology -- of sports, traveling, fashion, music, artsy food [and

ever more new treats around our bodies], the increasingly “spiritual” sphere of our professional lives will be at a distance and therefore immune to any kinds of physical interference. In other words: while we push their culture further and further, we do definitely not bring our bodies and our senses “back” into our professional lives.

A primordial question for our future is whether this new ontological and existential juxtaposition will end up being as limiting as the juxtaposition between individual Rationality and religious Cosmology that had emerged in early modern Castile. Once again, I do not presuppose any “historical necessity” for this to happen. More terrifying perhaps than any idea of such a limitation would be a state where the [then “formerly”] professional side in this juxtaposition would be able to run without participation of the human consciousness. This seems to be the situation that Alexandre Kojève imagined as a true ending of History.