

Book Review

Sandie Holguín, *Flamenco Nation. The Construction of Spanish National Identity*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019, 361 pp, 40 illustrations. ISBN 9780299321802

In May 1847, the American traveller S. Teackle Wallis arrived in Seville in the middle of a wave of protests against the rise in the price of grain. Two days after witnessing a violent riot in the tobacco factory, he attended a 'private ballet', in which 'a black-eyed, gypsy-looking girl, one of the cigarreras of the riot' featured prominently. Her dance reflected some of the fury that erupted two days previously. This scene, which excellently depicts some of the topics with which Spanish 'exoticism' is viewed by romantic travellers, is used by Sandie Holguín to introduce a subject as attractive as it is complex: the role of flamenco in the construction of Spanish national identity.

Both the title of the book – *Flamenco Nation* – and the illustration on the cover are provocative. At first glance, one could assume that this is a book that provides an external view of flamenco as a symbol of an exotic Spain that has attracted many travellers and tourists, but is not recognized by the Spanish themselves. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The author, a historian with a number of previous publications on Spain's contemporary history, among them the book *Creating Spaniards: Culture and National Identity in Republican Spain*



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(University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), examines with depth and accuracy this complex subject.

The work stems from a question that precisely reflects the aforementioned conundrum: 'How did flamenco, castigated as a degenerate form of song and dance associated with both the Gypsies, a despised ethnic minority in Spain, and Andalusia, a region often derided as backward, become inexorably tied to Spain's national identity? Why did flamenco persist as a symbol of the nation when so many elites within Spain worked feverishly for nearly a century to excise it from the country?' (pp. 7-8). To answer these questions, Holguín carries out an extensive analysis that begins in the late eighteenth century and continues through to 1975. Her research is not focused on flamenco as a form of musical expression, although she does outline in chapter 1 the origin and evolution of the genre in its essential elements (*toque, cante* and *baile*), to initiate the reader who may be unfamiliar with the origins of flamenco. She instead approaches the subject from a holistic perspective, by placing 'the evolution of this performance within the larger Spanish and European historical, cultural, and political trends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (p. 8). This is one of the successful aspects of the work, which goes beyond the traditional approaches in the study of flamenco, in favour of a transnational perspective, examining both the internal and external images of Spain in the construction of its national identity. In reference to the discussion on national identity, some statements by the author could be refuted, such as 'over the course of the nineteenth century, flamenco became reified as one of two major expressions of Spanish national identity – the other one being bullfighting'. However, her analysis of complex concepts such as nationalism, regionalism or national identity is exemplary.

Flamenco Nation is composed of three parts divided into seven chapters, preceded by a documented introduction and ended with a final coda, a glossary, notes, an extensive bibliography and a useful onomastic index. After the introduction, which gives a thorough historiographical review and sets out the main bases of the study, the first part, 'Setting the stage', is divided into two chapters. The first of which is an overview of the history of flamenco, its roots and how it evolved up until the early days of the Restoration (1875). The author makes a commendable effort of synthesis, founded on a great deal of interdisciplinary literature on the subject, even if this synthesis does result in some inaccuracies when it comes to defining the particularities that set flamenco apart from other pre-flamenco and Andalusian popular music forms. Chapter 2, 'The Perils of Flamenco in Restoration Spain, 1875-1923', explores the phenomenon of *antiflamenquismo* during the Restoration period (1875-1923) amongst three distinct elite groups, the Catholic Church and its conservative allies, left-leaning intellectuals and politicians, and the leaders of revolutionary workers' movements. This reaction coincides with the rise of flamenco as a popular spectacle, especially in the *cafés cantantes* of Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville. Here we see the full force of the contradiction interrogated at the outset of the book: while flamenco grew as a popular mass spectacle, the elites who considered themselves 'guardians of the Spanish national identity' rejected it.

The second part, 'Flamenco on the regional and international stage', examines the different perceptions of flamenco, widening the lens to incorporate both an international and regionalist points of view. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the cases of Catalonia and Andalusia respectively. The first describes the opposition by the emerging force of Catalan nationalism, that tries to counteract the influence of flamenco by promoting manifestations they considered their own, such as the

sardana or choral singing. Chapter 4 focuses on Andalusian regionalism through the figure of Blas Infante who is considered to be ‘the father of the Andalusian nation’, and his efforts to define flamenco as a worthy art form. Especially interesting is Chapter 5, which moves away from Spain to international exhibitions, examining how Spanish elites wanted to have their nation represented and how that projected national identity failed to live up to their expectations on the world stage. The chapter also cites the strives of various avant-garde artists, such as García Lorca, Manuel de Falla or Debussy, to elevate the status of flamenco to that of a veritable art.

The third part, ‘Flamenco and the Franco regime’, through the last two chapters, grapples with the Franco regime’s ambivalence towards using flamenco as a principal marker of Spanish identity. Chapter 6 reveals that the regime, with the help of the Catholic Church and the leaders of the Spanish Falange, wanted to purify the Spanish culture in accordance with the principles of national-catholicism, enhancing the patriotic spirit through the activity of regional Spanish choirs and dance groups. It was a way of homogenising Spanish folklore, and establishing a new kind of national identity, one of ‘unity in difference’, and of suppressing the musical supremacy of flamenco. Finally, Chapter 7 looks at the way the Franco regime, in conjunction with a developing Spanish tourist industry, changed course yet again to promote flamenco in order to bolster tourism industry in Spain. This tactic once again perpetuated the same old stereotypes.

Holguín ends the book with a Coda that guides us back to the present, where the dynamics between globalization and regional autonomy have once again transformed contemporary flamenco practices.

Throughout the volume, the author's ability to rigorously, clearly and attractively present the topics is evident. She combines the handling of a large number of sources and references with anecdotes and illustrations, and grabs the reader's attention with phrases like this one that opens chapter 1: 'Contrariness gave birth to flamenco'. A clear didactic vocation is also apparent in the structure of the book itself, which includes summaries and recapitulations at the beginning of each section. But beyond the formal aspects, the book provides an interesting and necessary insight into the subject of flamenco, which is increasingly present in academic literature. In short, it is essential reading in better understanding the place of flamenco in contemporary Spain.

María Nagore-Ferrer

Universidad Complutense de Madrid