CHAPTER SIX

THE ANIMALS OF SPAIN: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

History would not be written by the human species if it were not for its dialectic of continuity and change. The past would be intuitively immediate to us all if there were no change, and it would be incomprehensible if we failed to perceive experiences comparable to ours today. The eighteenth century witnessed noticeable changes in the Spanish empire, but there were also significant continuities. Though interpretive emphases might shift culturally with new monarchs and new learning, nonhuman animals continued to provide labor, food, clothing, entertainment and companionship. And humans continued to reflect on the animality inherent in their humanity. In 1700, Philip V (r. 1700-1746), a French Bourbon king, ascended the imperial Spanish throne, and increasingly throughout the century a small group of intellectuals tried to inject Enlightenment notions into Spanish culture and policy, but the animals of Spain remained a physical reality who had to be considered, even as Spanish imperial culture was not completely overturned by an Enlightenment revolution.

The Material Limits of Enlightenment

In the midst of ongoing and increasingly expensive wars, Bourbon policies attempted to make the Spanish empire less poor. Unfortunately, Spain itself experienced demographic increase from some 7.6 million people in 1717 to 10.5 or 11.5 million people in 1797.1 Human population exceeded the generation of new employment opportunities in manufacturing, and the traditional balance between

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grazing and cultivation faced increased pressure for readjustment.² Humans grew in numbers, but the quality of life did not necessarily increase with population. Spanish life expectancy at birth remained well within the early modern average, failing to surpass twenty-seven years.³ A Mesta shepherd might have his basic subsistence needs cared for with daily allotments of bread for himself and his dog in addition to oil, tallow and a salary, but laboring peasants’ wages at the beginning of the eighteenth century were commonly 5 or 6 reales a day, with bread costing 5.5 reales.⁴ In the province of Madrid in 1754, peasant day laborers earned only 5 reales and local non-Mesta shepherds earned a meager 4 reales.⁵ Life was hard for a growing rural population in Spain, with day laborers accounting for 44% of the peasant population and only 19% of the peasantry owning their own farms according to the census of 1797.⁶

Sheep and the Mesta received some of the blame for the general misery in 1766 when riots protesting the high price and paucity of bread spread throughout Spain. In a reversal of Caxa de Leruela’s praise of Pan and pastoralism, don Pedro Manuel Sáenz de Pedroso y Ximeno, the procurador general of the Council of Castile, wrote that herding was being privileged at the expense of settled agriculture, and just as Cain, Adam’s first born, had been driven to conflict with Abel the shepherd, bloody conflict between Spain’s desperate farmers and herders might erupt.⁷ Don Pedro argued that the Mesta’s privileges had to end to satisfy the hunger of the Spanish people, and policies under don Pedro’s monarch Charles III certainly worked to that effect. During his reign lasting from 1759 to 1788, Charles III

² Ringrose, 8, 173-75.
³ Between 1541 and 1871, English life expectancy averaged 35.5. The Japanese also seem to have had a high average. However, in France from 1740 to 1790, the male life expectancy hovered between 24 and 28, while female life expectancy ranged from 26 to 30 years—quite comparable to the life expectancy in eighteenth-century Spain. James C. Riley writes, “Across the globe in 1800 it seems unlikely that the average life lasted 30 years; indeed it may not have lasted 25 years. A few people lived to be old, but many died in infancy or early childhood.” James C. Riley, Rising Life Expectancy: a Global History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 32-33.
⁴ Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Sociedad y estado en el siglo XVIII español (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1984), 30; Lynch, Bourbon Spain, 237.
⁶ Lynch, Bourbon Spain, 236.