Marx on Spain

Analysis and Tambourines

I think it continues to be true that if, as I wrote in the 1960s, the reading of Marx’s articles on Spain may be interesting for people today, it is because those articles are a good illustration of his method, his intellectual style. Even so, one might also wish to read them less out of a desire to learn than for entertainment, for those journalistic pieces (correspondent’s reports and in-depth articles for the New York Daily Tribune written in 1854 and 1856) allow us to glimpse a backdrop of experience or perception [vivencia] of all things Spanish, composed of both common clichés and Marx’s own shrewd observations. This backdrop also reflects a familiarity with the ethical and poetic motifs of the Schillerian Sturm und Drang, the young Goethe and the old Goethe, the sensibility of the Young Germany in regard to the assonance of Castilian romance verse, and the sensibility of German romanticism in regard to our Baroque drama. All of this adds interest, between aesthetics and the wisdom of life, to the value of the methodological example, which is without doubt the most important thing in Marx’s writings on Spain.

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1 An allusion to ‘the Spain of the tambourine’ [‘la España de pandereta’], i.e. the ‘typical’ Spain geared to tourists [Ed.].
2 Marx’s articles on Spain consist of the following: 11 relatively brief correspondent’s reports on the June 1854 O’Donnell and Dulce uprising; nine in-depth articles, or small essays, on Spanish history, of which the newspaper for which he wrote them (along with his correspondent’s reports), the New York Daily Tribune, only published eight; two more correspondent’s reports on the occasion of O’Donnell’s 1856 coup; and the ‘Bolivar’ article for the New American Cyclopedia, which is from 1858. Engels also wrote articles on Spanish affairs for the New York Daily Tribune: three articles in 1860, titled ‘The Moorish War’, on O’Donnell’s capture of Tetouan. Besides that, he wrote about the Spanish Army for Putnam’s Magazine (1855) and the articles ‘Badajoz’ and ‘Bidosa’ for the New American Cyclopedia (1858). However, Engels’s most important and influential text on Spain is the set of four articles titled ‘The Bakuninists at Work’ [‘Die Bakuninisten and der Arbeit’], published in 1873 in Der Volksstaat, the organ of the German Social Democracy. The present article only considers Marx’s articles on Spain.
The sensibility that these readings and experiences, which were not always well developed, awoke in Marx reveals a certain affinity with things Spanish, often in contrast to a certain scorn, no less a German Romantic cliché, toward a large part of French literature, as in this passage from a letter to Engels of 3 May 1854, a sample of the taste – and good taste, one must say – of German Romanticism:

> At odd moments I am going in for Spanish. Have begun with Calderón from whose *Mágico prodigioso* – the Catholic Faustus – Goethe drew not just a passage here or there but whole settings for some of scenes in his *Faust*. Then – *horrible dictu* – I am reading in Spanish what I’d found impossible in French, Chateaubriand’s *Atala* and *René*, and some stuff by Bernardin de St-Pierre.3

The affinity in question has its odd moments, as when, referring to the Castilian War of the Communities, Marx speaks of Carlos I and explains to his American public: ‘or Charles V, as the Germans call him’ (*New York Daily Tribune* [NYDT], 9 September 1854).4 When he transforms himself into a Spaniard, Marx can become as moving as on orator on 12 October;5 thus he comments, for example, on the defeat of the *Comuneros* [Communities rebels]:

> If after the reign of Carlos I the decline of Spain, both in a political and social aspect, exhibited all those symptoms of inglorious and protracted putrefaction so repulsive in the worst times of the Turkish Empire, under the Emperor at least the ancient liberties were buried in a magnificent tomb. This was the time when Vasco Núñes de Balboa planted the banner of Castile upon the shores of Darien, Cortés in Mexico, and Pizarro in Peru; when Spanish influence reigned supreme in Europe, and the Southern imagination of the Iberians was bewildered with visions of Eldorados, chivalrous adventures, and universal monarchy.6

And the attraction of things Spanish is not limited to the brilliant period in which ‘Spanish liberty disappeared’;7 also: ‘an appreciation of… all she [Spain] has done and suffered since the Napoleonic usurpation… [is] one of the most

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3 Marx 1983a, p. 447.
4 Marx 1980d, p. 392.
5 Spain’s national holiday [Ed.].
6 Marx 1980d, p. 395.
7 Ibid.