Tourism and tyranny in Franco’s Spain
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Introduction
Tourism and dictatorship have been described as the two prevailing emblems of Franco’s Spain, yet the two could scarcely appear more discordant (Pack, 2006, 1). However, while the threat of opening borders to outsiders can be potentially dangerous on a number of levels to authoritarian regimes – incomers, for example, can contaminate the mindset of the general populace with ‘foreign’ ideologies, spread political unrest or, by producing additional domestic wealth, create a new class with greater economic and political influence to contest the dictatorship’s authority – it is a risk that some regimes have been willing to take. More to the point, it could be argued that it was Franco who set the template which others, such as Tito in the former Yugoslavia and Castro in Cuba, have subsequently followed. The relationship between tyranny and tourism may be paradoxical, yet Franco achieved this balancing act. The question is: how and why did he attempt to do this, and to what extent was he successful?

Pre-Civil War
It is only in recent years that the issue of tourism has attracted the attention of historians. Indeed, as John Walton has argued, ‘the underdevelopment of tourism as a mainstream theme in modern British historical writing’ can be seen as an ‘indicator of the cultural conservatism of the historical profession’ (Berghoff et al. 2002, 109). The developing historiography of tourism has tended to focus largely on eighteenth and nineteenth century British experiences (e.g. Withy 1997) or addressed the ‘heritage debate’ raised by Robert Hewison (Hewison 1987). However, recent research has served to expand perspectives by looking, for example, at the cultural, political and economic impact on both visitors and hosts (e.g. Shelmerdine 2002, and 2006, Barke et al. 1996). It is, as such, the intention of the article to add a modest contribution to this growing and important body of research.

In the approach to what we might call ‘the Franco years’ (1936-1975), foreign tourism had started to grow in the major cities of Spain. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the country lagged far behind the principle destinations of Italy, Switzerland, France and Germany (Barke and Towner 1996, 16). The First World War was to bring a virtual halt to foreign tourism, though the post-war years saw a growth in visitor numbers as Spain’s profile rose courtesy of its appeal to writers and artists who liked the idea of a nation that had been ‘untainted’ or ‘untouched’ by the war. The middle
classes of northern Europe usually visited informally via travel agents, such as Thomas Cook (Brendon 1991), who acted via independent contacts with hotels etc., the latter despite the fact that Spain had been ahead of most in the field by creating a Comision Nacional de Turismo by as early as 1905. In comparison, France did not create an official tourist office until 1910, Italy until 1919 and Britain until 1929.

In the 1920s and 30s the Spanish Government had also been more pro-active under the leadership of Primo de Rivera in trying to modernise its infrastructure with better roads and railways. In an early example of the political relevance of tourism, the improved infrastructure served the dual purpose of creating a sense of nationhood while opening Spain to broader European influence. Furthermore, many of the improvements were undertaken for obvious placatory reasons in the separatist regions of Barcelona and Seville, with the two main international exhibitions hosted by the Government in this period also held in these two regions (Barke and Towner 1996, 16-18). State-run hotels, or paradores, were also conceived at this time and there was a large amount of private investment in hotels. Nevertheless, the annual number of tourists visiting during the Second Republic averaged at around 200,000, with about 20,000 being British. Still, although significant, these annual British visitor numbers to Spain amounted to little more than what a home-grown seaside resort in Britain might have expected to enjoy at that period in a single summer's day (Shelmerdine 2002, 370).

The disturbances which preceded the Civil War, were to result in an obvious decline in tourism, from about 440,000 visitors in 1930 to 190,000 in 1934 (Lavaur 1980, 16). During the Civil War and ensuing Second World War tourism was obviously greatly effected, though nationalist press officer Luis Bolín did try unsuccessfully to set up battlefield tours as part of an anti-Republican propaganda campaign whilst the Civil War was still ongoing. However, the key point here is that the economic and political importance of the role of tourism in Spain had clearly been established prior to Franco's dictatorship. As a result, there was perhaps less of a paradox than might originally have been envisaged in his decision to approach the issue of tourism in a pragmatic fashion; even if Franco and his closest advisers could not, as one of Franco's ministers is quoted as having put it, have cared less about 'foreigners coming in and showing off their hairy legs' (Pack 2009). The fact remains that Franco's government appears to have been sufficiently pluralist to engage pro-tourism policies that allowed many constituencies to take considerable economic and political advantage of the fact. The reason why this was the case is undoubtedly down to Spain's place in European and World affairs during the 1940s and 50s.
The Forties and Fifties

After the defeat of fascism in Europe, Franco's regime had been left isolated, without a major ally and, by 1945, had also been excluded from the UN. In addition, the door had been closed to all of the major European and World processes, including aid from the American Marshall Plan. Franco subsequently closed Spain's borders to European trade at the end of the forties and even physically closed the border with France for a period in 1946; although that did not mean that tourists were not still allowed or, indeed, visiting. Statistics show that 1.3 million people entered the country in 1951 compared to 172,892 in 1948 (Gomez and Sinclair 1996, 65). In fact, Franco was clearly quick to realise that revenue from tourism could provide the collateral for obtaining international loans and the foreign currency needed to purchase industrial equipment and finance large-scale projects. Essentially, modern tourism would enable him to extract wealth from his neighbours who did benefit from things like the Marshall Plan; and he could do so without sacrificing his own position. Furthermore, operating in such a political vacuum, tourism could provide his regime with the chance to enter into a form of dialogue with other countries. The following quotation from Sasha D Pack is worth repeating here:

“It is an error to assume that the Franco regime's highly touted autarkic principles were ever fully realised, or even defined the regime's ideal program. The goals and composition of Franco's government were too complex to permit a total retreat to isolationism. Enhancing Spanish prestige and strengthening the industrial economy were both important components of the Francoist national resurrection. (Pack 2006, 41)

In practical terms, the mechanics of Spain's tourism drive included a 'Stabilization Plan' which marked an end of the policy of autarky, opening the country to greater foreign investment and trade. This was supported by the abolition of entry visas for tourists from Western Europe in 1959, resulting in a 500 per cent increase in arrivals the following year. The latter move really enabled tourism to ‘take off’ and it can be argued that the regime deserves credit for it (Hooper 1987, 19-20). A favourable exchange rate had already been introduced for tourists and long-term loans for hotel construction made available by the Spanish banks. As such, it is hardly surprising that Spain enjoyed its fastest growth in visitor numbers between 1951 and 1959 (Sinclair and Sutcliffe, 1979). Nor should it be surprising that by the late 50s tourism had become the best way for Franco to finance inflation, balance accounts and fund reforms. Official tourism income had matched the revenue from mining in 1957, one of Spain's most lucrative raw export areas. With little direct aid
forthcoming, Spain's commercial accounts were completely dependent on its most competitive exports of tourism, agriculture and mining (Pack 2006, 85). The question that should perhaps be asked is, if tourism was so clearly providing Franco with leverage on both the international and domestic stage, how did the international community feel about this and why was it so complicit in allowing a regime to prosper, that most western nations still viewed as a pariah?

**Internationalism and Interaction**

Following the end of the Second World War it would appear that there was a general feeling that tourism could be beneficial in the engendering of world peace. The interaction of different peoples and cultures was seen as a positive in this respect, and it was a point made all too clear in the period of the Cold War when freedom of movement was reflected ideologically with the graphic metaphor of 'the Iron Curtain'. Fear of fascism had been surpassed by the fear of communism. Still, regardless of this, it appears that Franco's Spain could be described as having escaped lightly for its recent Nazi sympathies and ongoing dictatorship. Perhaps France held the strongest grudge, with its visitor numbers decreasing in 1951 from 37% to 22%, while the share of incomers from West Germany rose from 2% to 13%. Meanwhile, tourism figures from the UK remained stable at around 12% (Gomez and Sinclair 1996, 67). The British public seemed remarkably ambivalent about Franco and were keen to take advantage of rises in disposable income, paid holidays – introduced in 1938 but obviously not fully effective until the end of the Second World War – and the birth of affordable package holidays and charter flights. By the early 1950s guidebooks were identifying Spain as a desirable country to visit and a network of tourist agencies had opened up. The Sunday Times newspaper was not alone in choosing to completely disregard the recent political and oft-bloody backdrops to the places it was recommending (such as Barcelona and Madrid), in its 1951 ‘Travel and Holiday Guide to the Continent of Europe’. Buchanan states that:

Despite much hand-wringing on the part of the left, by the 1960s millions of British workers were seeking cheap, sunny holidays on the beaches of Spain irrespective of history – and indeed the continuing spasmodic brutality - of the Franco regime (Buchanan 2007, 159).

Such brutality was very much to the fore during the peak of the economic boom in the Sixties, which had also seen a revival of activity among opposition groups such as blue-collar workers and students. Franco was quick to repress the protests and even executed the communist leader Julian Grimau. Despite worldwide condemnation, the tourists kept arriving. Even radical publications such as the New Statesman in Britain apparently saw no conflict of interest in decrying the regime
editorially, while carrying lucrative adverts for Spanish holidays at the same time. That is not to say that the Left simply rolled over in Britain, or Europe as a whole. Groups such as the Appeal for Amnesty in Spain, Amnesty International and Spanish Democrats' Defence Fund were all outspoken and may have played a major part in influencing the decision to keep Spain out of NATO in the sixties. In 1970 Amnesty International, for example, put up posters at airports showing imprisoned faces on a backdrop of sandy beaches and blue skies, while the National Union of Mineworkers urged members not to holiday in Spain in 1969. However, the seemingly apolitical nature of tourism benefited a power which most European nations continued to find politically distasteful (Pack 2006, 113).

More to the point, in 1963 Spanish communists advised their British comrades against a holiday boycott because they said it would be ineffective and it was actually better to have their 'helpful presence' in the country (Bourne 1963 in Buchanan 2007, 172). Even the watchfulness of Franco's Civic Guard over locals and visitors does not seem to have been too much of an issue, though British visitor Colin Starr certainly could not have been alone in conceding that the presence of the Civil Guard could be intimidating:

We joined a train which was made up of elderly open coaches; in the next set of seats was a man, wife and several children. My wife made friends immediately by offering them sweets, an action which became rather embarrassing as the father came to thank us and indicated that he was a communist with no time for General Franco. This was, as you can imagine in those days, not the sort of conversation one wanted to be involved in. (Barke and Towner 1996, 19)

However, the reality may have been slightly less threatening. Franco, ever the pragmatist, had already started to rein-in the Civic Guard in full awareness of the fact that tourism was underpinning his regime. He clearly was not about to kill the fatted calf, even if it was to set him on a collision course with the leaders of his own faith.

Liberalism and the Sixties

During the 1960s foreign currency from tourism, helped by package holidays and charter flights, was to dominate Spain's receipts from the uncompetitive agricultural and manufacturing sectors and continued to offset deficits on the balance of trade in the 1970s (Gomez and Sinclair 1996, 89). In general, rises in tourism receipts considerably increased the level aggregate demand in the economy, stimulating increases in income and employment, not only directly in tourism, but in
other sectors linked to it, in addition to the extra disposable income that those directly or indirectly involved in tourism now enjoyed. As a result, production in the country’s capital goods sector in the 1960s rose at double the rate of production in the industrial sector, though the demand for additional capital goods still outstripped supply, resulting in further rises in imports. This rising import bill was financed in the main by earnings from tourism (Gomez and Sinclair 1996, 91). Public awareness of foreign tourism unsurprisingly rose dramatically; not least as so many of them were active participants as either hosts or tourists themselves.

All of the above no doubt helped a country steeped in Catholic conservatism to tackle the growing sexual and moral liberalism that came either directly or indirectly as part of the overseas tourism package. Franco and his new Minister of Information and Tourism, Manuel Fraga, realised that a certain level of permissiveness would benefit not only the economy but the larger project of extending Spain's good name and image in Europe. The Government, as such, did virtually nothing to discourage the free and relatively liberal development of beach tourism, nor did it try to hide it from the rest of Spain. This resulted in the daily Stuttgart Zeitung newspaper confidently reporting in 1963 that anyone familiar with Spanish beaches would be well aware of the fact that women wore bikinis and 'nobody causes a fuss about it, nor does the Civil Guard respond with a scalding bayonet' (11 April 1963).

This correlation between tourism and sexual permissiveness was to have a major social impact on Spain and particularly a new generation, influencing sub-genres such as cinema between 1965 and 1973. At a rapid rate parts of the nation, that had not seen a great deal of change in decades, were faced with a new way of life, one where ‘the men had more money than they could cram in their wallets and the women walked around virtually naked’ (Hooper 1987, 21). A study in 1971 showed that 90% of the new cases of non-chronic mental illness reported at the psychiatric ward at the hospital in Malaga were teenage males from the rural areas who had come to work on the coast and had struggled to cope with what they were seeing (Hooper 1987, 21). Still, the likes of Fraga had limited sympathy for the puritanical and he advised one critic to ‘keep in mind that certain positions are easy to maintain when one does not bear the burden of administering the general interests of a country’ (Hooper 1987, 147).

The regime did, however, try to appease the Catholic Church via the reviving of the Medieval Pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. In fact, Franco had previously used this route for what some have described as 'national theatre', following the Civil War – the religious symbolism and
commercial possibilities of the pilgrimage offering Franco the chance to put forward a more respectable face for his tourism, while winning favour with the Church. As for Fraga, he told his staff on gaining the ministry that he saw the growth of tourism as a 'call to crusade' (Hooper 1987, 109). Fraga was not alone in seeing tourism as the new faith of the masses, although the irony of the terminology and general situation cannot have been lost on Franco's former opponents: the dictator's Nationalists had supposedly been 'called to Crusade' during the Civil War, in a bid to keep Republican liberalism, and the threat it posed to the traditional Spanish way of life, at bay.

Fraga is given a great deal of the credit for having succeeded in bringing about a coalition of liberal commercial interests to take tourism forward. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Franco's Spain totally relinquished its more conservative / Catholic roots or that Franco himself was prepared to at least appear to stray too far from his more traditional stance. For example, when The Mayor of Benidorm, Pedro Zaragoza Orts, was facing ex-communication by the Catholic Church, for allowing bikini-wearing tourists on his beaches, he made a direct appeal to Franco. The dictator could not be seen to compromise his moral position by directly interceding, so he sent out a tacit message to the Church by getting his wife and the Minister of Governance to visit Benidorm and stay with the Mayor. The ex-communication process was dropped and the bikini was to remain. (Tremlett, ch.4). Still, while the censors had finally conceded to change and allowed bikinis on cinema screens in 1964, it was not until after Franco had died that the first picture of a model displaying bare nipples appeared in a Spanish publication (in 1976), while it was a further two years before Spain's first sex shop opened and not until 1979 that topless women were tolerated on any Spanish beaches. Furthermore, while contraception may have been available to holidaymakers in Spain, it was not made legal until after the death of the dictator. In addition, while the allure of tourism had attracted migration from the interior, there were still large areas of Spain that remained deeply traditional. It is important to recognise that tourism was not regionally homogeneous.

Regionalism and Devolution

Although a word like 'devolution' is too strong to describe the relinquishing of some central powers by the Franco dictatorship, there was a necessary move towards elements of regional control in which tourism played a major part. The political position of state versus local jurisdiction was brought into sharp focus by the fact that foreign tourism was most prevalent on the peripheries, particularly in Catalan-speaking areas. A general devolution of Government authority was, of course, unthinkable, but regional issues were addressed via limited administrative restructuring that included 'tourist municipalities' with additional credits, privileges and appointed Mayors. In
practical terms, the arrival of the charter flight had quite literally resulted in Madrid more often than not being bypassed by flights heading straight to the provinces. Even Government attempts to exert control over hotel prices with maximum and minimum tariffs between the sixties and seventies were ultimately compromised, with hoteliers given freedom to offer discounts (Gomez and Sinclair 1996, 85). Perhaps a 'special correspondent' for The Times had been right when he wrote on June 12, 1950, that Franco's regime was 'unlike any other', claiming that the practicalities of governance in Spain – democratic or authoritarian – meant that the only successful policy could ever be to 'issue broad edicts but overlook their detailed application whenever it is convenient'.

There can be little doubt that tourism had played a considerable role in allowing many 'oppressed' groups to raise their profiles and economic strength, though the power of self-advertisement did not really come to areas like Andalusia, Galicia and the Basque communities until after Franco's death in 1975. Still, the 'economic miracle' of the fifties and sixties, of which tourism was such a major factor, had also helped provide the Franco government with the receipts to support competitive industrialisation, and the result was a mass movement of peasants from the rural areas to the tourist and industrial centres in search of work. The British writer John Langdon-Davies wrote on a trip to Spain in the early fifties that he had already noted that many young Catalans were flourishing as industrialists under Franco and were investing in 'stately pleasure domes' in their rural villages as weekend escapes (Langdon-Davies 1953, 54).

Tourism demand was not evenly distributed across Spain, but some of the wealth was being redistributed, albeit in a limited fashion. The government had also given grants to interior villages and diocese to build dozens of paradores to promote tourism away from the beach, though rural tourism was not seriously advertised until the 1980s. Nevertheless, it has been argued that these attempts at redistribution of wealth certainly helped quell some of the motivation for insurrection, particularly in Catalonia. For the first two decades of Franco rule, Catalonia had been at the heart of opposition to the regime, but two attempts to overthrow the government in the late forties failed miserably and even mass protests and strikes in the fifties failed to seriously challenge the status quo. As Hooper says, 'Being the focus of opposition and promoting it are two very different things and the truth is that the role played by Catalan nationalists in fighting Franco was by and large a pretty tame one.' (Hooper 1987, 414) While this essay is not about the oppression of specific groups under Franco, it is worth noting that the Catalan language – which Franco banned – did suffer seriously, though the absence of violent nationalism in Catalonia resulted in this region generally
escaping the relentless oppression that the populations of the Basque communities, in particular, faced.

**Conclusion**

While Franco's connections with the fascist dictators, his committed Catholic conservatism and his contempt for liberal democracy would appear, as Pack suggests, 'discordant' when linked with European tourism, consumerism, trans-nationalism and permissiveness, it is clear that the dictator saw tourism as key to the domestic economy, international acceptance and national regeneration. The rising prominence of travel and tourism allowed him to interact with the outside world, while stimulating commerce, so helping to ameliorate his diplomatic problems, whilst solving the fiscal problems that were inherent in isolationism. Tourism was a political rather than an administrative issue for Franco. It is hard not to agree with Buchanan that tourism resulted in the rediscovery of Spain by the rest of Europe and enabled the country, its people and its heritage to be seen as removed from the excesses of the Franco regime – even if those excesses were not completely overlooked by left-leaning and humanitarian groups (Buchanan 2007, 174).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the extension of the European tourist industry to Spain did a good deal to integrate Spain into the European economy, society, and mass culture at a time when the regime's brutality was very much ongoing. One could, effectively, be said to have supported the other. It is worth considering Pack's claim, that it is largely down to the tourist industry that Spain’s 'economic and socio-cultural convergence with the dominant norms of democratic Europe was largely underway, if not complete, by the time the political transition began in the mid-1970s' (Pack 2009). Essentially, tourism may have supported a dictator, but it had helped sugar a very bitter pill for much of the populace and ultimately made it far easier for a nation to be reborn and accepted on the wider international stage when 'the tyrant' had gone.

**References**


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