

Alter-Modernities of the Spanish Exception: Three Communitarian Experiences in Spain and the New World (1516-1962)

Víctor M. Pueyo (Panel Coordinator)
(Temple University, USA)

Ana Fernández Cebrián (Speaker)
(Columbia University, USA)

Guillermo Morales-Jodra
(Georgia College and State University, USA)

Modernity, or what some dare to call Modernity, is roughly associated with the liberal, Anglo-protestant capitalist mode of production in whose “late” stage we are still currently dwelling. Regardless of its philosophical expression (the cogito in Descartes, the transcendental self in Kant), this triumphant modernity rests upon the notion of the free subject, to the extent that it is almost impossible to think of a way to be modern that does not either embrace or challenge this notion. That which cannot be attributed to the symbolic economy of a free subject is automatically deemed to be pre-modern, and therefore blemished with the stigma of feudal backwardness, religious obscurantism and naïve underdevelopment. In other words: that which cannot be attributed to the symbolic economy of a free subject is *the embryonic form of a free subject*. Thus, modernity is in itself a teleological concept, inasmuch as it enables a consistently teleological reading of the past. The Spanish case is a paradigmatic example of it. Despite frequent historical inaccuracies and exaggerations, liberal historiography is obviously right in condemning the feudal atrocities of the Habsburgic state. However, it very rarely questions the relevance of a denounce that is five hundred years old and cannot possibly encounter any intellectual opposition today. We usually forget that there is a Black Legend to the Black Legend, that is, that the capitalist mode of production could have not succeeded without defining its contours against the backdrop of a catholic other. This catholic other quickly became a caricature of itself, which received a condescending and often openly racist treatment and which allowed for a now canonical Spanish genealogy of delay. Everything Spanish can be analyzed in the light of such prolific genealogy. Like in Zeno’s Paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise, Spain would be constantly trying to catch up with a progress that is always prefigured and never fully attained.

While this genealogy of delay is very well-documented from the sixteenth-century to the Francoist regime, we do believe that it is much more interesting to take the opposite route, that is, the non-teleological one. What happens if we take this “catholic other” very seriously for just one time? What if it is a much more complex character than the one-dimensional household brand to which textbook orthodoxy has accustomed us? History is necessary and yet contingent. Could this form of otherness have spawned an accordingly different modernity (say, an alter-modernity) had its own progress not been smashed by the set of hegemonic discourses that we now call modernity? After all, there is a distinctively catholic utopian tradition that dates back to Thomas More’s own *Utopia*, a tradition that – we claim – gives way to utopian experiences that are qualitatively different from its liberal and much more popular counterpart (represented by Owen, Fourier or Saint-Simon, to name a few).

In this panel we are exploring three instances of the Spanish alter-modern. First, going back to the Black Legend, the early Dominican communities designed by Bartolomé de las Casas in 1516 and the so-called colonial Hospitals built by Vasco de Quiroga in 1532 (Pueyo). Secondly, the obliterated mystical road to modernity, which poses the possibility of a modernity that is not based on an individual subject, but on a communal soul (Morales). Finally, the proliferation of catholic communes managed by civil benefactresses in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Spain, as depicted by authors like Benito Pérez Galdós and Luis Buñuel (Fernández).