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The Second Republic: A Noble Failure?

EDWARD MALEFAKIS

In retrospect, it seems incredible that I had already been working on the Second Spanish Republic for twenty years before I fully realized how truly distinctive it had been. This realization surprised me in April 1981, while I was participating in the “International Colloquium on the Spanish Second Republic” commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic’s proclamation at the University of Tarragona. I arrived expecting to find the usual small academic gathering – a few professors who would lecture on their specialities, a handful of advanced graduate students working on their theses, some especially conscientious undergraduates, and a sprinkling of older persons who had lived through the Republic’s turbulent events. Instead, the audience at the opening session numbered several hundred. And while there would be fluctuations in its size according to who was speaking or the specific topic being discussed, attendance remained in the hundreds for all four days of the Colloquium. Interest did not wane, the crowds did not drift away. Morning, afternoon and night (for the meeting’s organizers had scheduled something for practically every minute of each day) many people came.

Why such interest in events of half a century earlier?, I wondered, especially as the Colloquium was mainly concerned with the peacetime Republic and did not, except for a few films, try to encompass the drama of the Civil War. If Tarragona were a huge metropolis instead of a medium-sized provincial capital, the popular response would have been less surprising. The same would have been true if the interest had been confined to Tarragona, to the period of the anniversary celebrations, or to professional historians. But this was not the case. Commemorative acts honouring the Republic were being held in many other Spanish localities as well as in a dozen universities in the United States. The flood of literature on the peacetime Republic – greater in volume than for any other

event in Spanish history except the Civil War itself – began long before and has continued long after April 1981, as was abundantly confirmed in 2006, when the Republic's 75th anniversary rolled around. Above all, both then and now, interest in the Republic is not confined to academic specialists or to persons who lived under it, but exists among most Spaniards, whatever their age, gender, socioeconomic status, or region of origin.

A PLETHORA OF REPUBLICS

To appreciate how unusual it is for the Second Republic to remain a living presence in Spain after so many decades, one need only look at the experience of the rest of Europe. It is often forgotten that the Spanish Republic was not an historically unique creation, but the last in a long series of republics established in Europe during the first third of the 20th century. The series began in 1910 with the overthrow of the monarchy in Portugal. It was expanded enormously at the end of the First World War, when no fewer than ten republics were proclaimed, starting with the short-lived Russian Republic of February to October 1917 and continuing with the German, Austrian, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, Polish, Latvian, Estonian and Finnish republics of 1918–1919. In 1922, another republican regime was added, in Ireland. In 1924, Greece also became a republic. In 1925, it was the turn of Albania. Thus, the Spanish Republic was the fifteenth such polity to be proclaimed in Europe within two decades if all cases are counted. If one chooses to disregard the very short-lived Russian and Hungarian republics as well as the basically artificial Albanian one, then Spain becomes the twelfth European nation to adopt a republican form of government between 1910 and 1931.

Except for Ireland, the sole republic established then that has endured up to the present, how many of these new beginnings are still celebrated today? How many remain deeply rooted in the collective memories of their respective nations, as well as in those of the rest of the world? The answer is clear. Only the Weimar and the Spanish republics have not been eclipsed as historical forces with the passage of time; only they still remain sharply etched historical presences. The Weimar republic, however, is remembered more for its cultural than its political achievements. The intellectual explosion that occurred in Germany during the 1920s is the only heritage of Weimar still capable of inspiring large numbers of people and serving as a national ideal. Weimar politics today are of interest not so much in themselves, because of the goals to which they aspired, as because of the great tragedy of Nazism to which they ultimately led. One need only list a few names to sense how partial the contemporary presence of Weimar is. All educated persons have some idea of who Brecht,

Gropius, Adorno and Thomas Mann were, but only specialists are still aware of such major Weimarian political figures as Ebert, Scheidemann, Erzberger, or even Stresemann.

The Spanish republic survives as an historical memory in a much more complete form. Interest in it is also partly centered on the cultural advances that accompanied it and on those elements that led to the great historical tragedy with which it ended. But in contrast to Weimar, its political history also continues to generate widespread attention in and of itself, not mainly as a prelude to the Civil War.

Why is this so? In my opinion, the principal reason is the rich legacy of political and social values it left behind. The Second Republic distinguished itself from Weimar and from its other homologues by the ambitiousness and breadth of its initial social and political vision. It remains more of a living presence today because its initial aspirations were loftier than those of the other republics with which it was contemporaneous. The light these latter cast was never very strong, hence it has not endured until today. The Spanish republic started as a more powerful beacon whose force, though subsequently dimmed, continues to illuminate and attract us. Despite all its flaws – and they were many – the republic of 1931–1939 had about it a nobility that made it exceptional in its own time as well as in the overall histories of Spain and Europe.

THE PORTUGUESE, POLISH, GREEK, AND GERMAN REPUBLICS

Obviously, these are strong value judgments, of the sort historians today are trained to avoid. Bitter experience has taught us to view most phenomena not as black or white but as various shades of grey. In what specific ways can the Spanish republic be considered nobler than other new regimes of the early 20th century? To answer this question we might begin by comparing the Spanish record to that of Portugal and Greece, the first and the penultimate of the republics established in the 1910s and 1920s, as well as to Germany and Poland, the two most important republics to emanate from the First World War.

The Portuguese republic, like the Spanish, was proclaimed without significant bloodshed after many decades in which support for the monarchy had been eroding because of its restrictive political practices, which violated constitutional ideals, and its administrative ineptness, which hindered Portugal in overcoming its backwardness relative to other European nations. As in Spain, the revolutionary forces included regenerationist intellectuals, the urban middle classes, and professional republican politicians. Some of its initial policies were the same: downgrading of the nobility; strong anti-clerical legislation; a programme to

expand secular education; wider political suffrage; civil marriage and divorce. But the resemblance ends there.¹

Unlike the Spanish, the Portuguese republic never aspired to serious social reform: greater trade union freedom was legally established, but use of this freedom met with consistent police repression and nothing was done toward structural reform of the Alentejo *latifundios*. Neither was there ever any significant programme of economic modernization. An insistence on balanced budgets rendered impossible any radical overhaul of the antiquated economic infrastructure. The republic's initiatives were therefore limited to greater political freedom and cultural modernization, but it failed even in connection with these. Portuguese republicans in 1910 continued to suffer from the fatal weakness of many Spanish progressives during the 19th century – excessive dependence on the Army – so nothing was done to restrict its political power. They also revealed their insecurity by withdrawing in 1913 the universal male suffrage they had granted in 1911, out of fear that the masses would support the clerical opposition in the rural north as well as the working class opposition in urban areas and the *latifundio* south. In a further display of lack of principle, the largest of the republican parties, the Democrats, built up a political machine that employed many of the corrupt practices condemned under the monarchy. As for cultural modernization, its negative aspect of eliminating ecclesiastical influence was pursued with far greater zeal than were its positive aspects of school construction, teacher training and extra-scholastic cultural diffusion.

In short, an incomplete, inconsistent programme prevented the Portuguese republic from achieving either a clear sense of purpose, or the enthusiastic support of any large sector of the population. Consequently, it quickly became the plaything of rival political factions and ambitious military leaders, compiling a chaotic record of multiple elections, cabinets, presidents and coups unmatched in European history. The hopes of 1910 were replaced, from perhaps as early as 1913, by a permanent crisis full of sound and fury that unfortunately signified nothing positive for anyone. Thus, when the long period of dictatorship that was imposed on Portugal by a military coup in 1926 was finally lifted in 1974, a few individuals of the republican era would be honored, but not the Republic itself nor its most representative figure, Afonso Costa. Both the Republic and most of its politicians exist in the Portuguese past as inescapable but somewhat embarrassing historical facts, not as proud and intellectually vital traditions from which any contemporary politician or party wishes to claim descent.

The Polish republic shared the narrowness and extreme factionalism of its Portuguese counterpart. The forces that brought it into being never achieved among themselves even a temporary or partial consensus sufficient to give the republic a clear sense of direction. Greater stress was laid

on economic modernization than in Portugal, but social reforms were almost as neglected, especially the need for a massive restructuring of landed properties. Measures to advance political democracy were feeble and inconsistent. As for cultural improvement and fundamental personal rights like divorce, much less was done than in Portugal, partly because of the lesser importance of intellectuals in the founding of the regime, but principally because of the absence of a strong anti-clerical tradition in Poland. The greatest defect of the Polish republic, however, was its excessive nationalism. This manifested itself externally, in its efforts from 1918 to 1921 to seize as much territory as possible from Germany, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, and above all Russia. Internally, the new regime betrayed fundamental republican principles by not trying harder to dilute the nearly universal anti-semitism that had long been one of Poland's many curses. Rather than trying harder to accommodate them, it also sought too hard to eradicate ethnic feelings among the other minority groups that, together with the Jews, constituted nearly one-third of Poland's population. This intensive nationalism inevitably enhanced the position of the military and of such war heroes as Joseph Pilsudski. The net result of all this was a *de facto* end of parliamentary government and progressive aspirations, first due to the bitterness and confusion of factional disputes and then, more permanently, because of the "guided democracy" inaugurated by Pilsudski's 1926 coup. Pilsudski's action was initially popular, as Primo de Rivera's 1923 coup had been in Spain. In its eight years of existence, the Polish republic had managed to discredit itself almost as much as the Spanish monarchy had done during the entire 19th and the first third of the 20th centuries.²

The Greek republic followed a different sequential pattern from either its Polish or Portuguese counterparts. Starting in 1924 as a minoritarian regime imposed by the military in collaboration with small republican parties, it survived the Pangalos dictatorship of 1926 and began to acquire widespread support and a laudable programme of action after 1928, when Greece's greatest statesman, Eleutherios Venizelos, returned from voluntary exile to try to end the political chaos. During his first two years in office it seemed possible that the republic might consolidate itself. Important measures of economic development were introduced; credit reforms benefited small peasant proprietors (Greece's largest social group), a major school construction programme and several other initiatives helped advance education. Above all, the extraordinarily difficult process of resettling the refugees was successfully completed (as a result of the First World War and the Turkish war that followed, Greece in the 1920s had to absorb a body of refugees equal to one-fourth of its previous population). Had Venizelos governed from the start of the republic, or had the world depression been delayed, the bitter divisions inherited from the 1915–1922 wars eventually might have been transcended, and

a consensus developed around the Republic. Instead, the depression severely damaged Greece's fragile, export-orientated economy, limited the financial resources available for Venizelos' ambitious programmes, and reversed the recent improvement in the position of the refugees and peasant proprietors. In consequence, Venizelos began to lose some of his backing after 1930, the residual royalism of the countryside revived, and Greece fell into a new period of the political instability from which Venizelos' return had seemed to rescue it. After 1932, government was paralyzed as republicans struggled against resurgent royalists in three elections as well as several military coups of differing magnitude and varying sponsorship. The monarchy was restored in 1935 as a purportedly constitutional regime, but within a year it transformed itself into a royally sponsored dictatorship under General Metaxas. Again, as in Portugal and Poland during the previous decade, the Greek republic had sufficiently discredited itself by August 1936 for Metaxas' coup to be essentially unopposed.³

The Weimar republic followed a sequential pattern that had some parallels with the Greek. In its origins, it too was a regime more imposed by events than built on an upsurge of true national consensus. Though nominally majoritarian, it was in fact narrowly based because large sectors of both its Catholic and its liberal sponsors accepted it only *faute de mieux*. The strenuous attacks of the monarcho-nationalist right and of the communist left further undermined its position. So too did the harsh peace terms imposed on Germany at Versailles, plus France's unremitting hostility, and especially the savage inflation of 1923 sparked by French occupation of the Ruhr. In such circumstances, the Weimar constitution might be a model document in its provisions for political democracy, but the reality was far different as revolution and counter-revolution constantly threatened, and as the military, judiciary and state bureaucratic apparatus were never purged of rightist elements. Ironically, because the Marxist left was so deeply split, with communists and majority socialists each regarding the other as a greater enemy than the right, the constitutional period, though dominated by the socialists, saw relatively little social reform. The east-Elbian estates were left untouched, the gigantic banking and industrial complexes continued to exercise their dominance over major sectors of the economy.⁴

Thus, as in Greece, by the time conditions permitted the Weimar republic to try to consolidate itself, it was probably already too late – especially as the depression hit Germany earlier and even harder than it did Greece. The five years (1924–1929) of relative stability that intervened were even less successful in creating a republican mystique than the 1928–1932 period in Greece, partly because the dominant leader, Gustav Stresemann, was less genuinely democratic than Venizelos. As a result, the Weimar republic died quickly and without putting up much resist-

ance when crisis conditions reappeared. Its demise began when the president rather than the parliament started to appoint cabinets after 1930; it was completed in 1933 when the senile Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor without serious opposition from the deeply divided and discouraged centre and left forces.

IN WHAT WAYS WAS THE SPANISH REPUBLIC DIFFERENT?

The Spanish republic clearly differed from all of its homologues in that it was able to define itself during its first two years as a regime which sought to achieve a far more complete and idealistic programme of national regeneration. The reforms introduced by the San Sebastián and Azaña coalitions between April 1931 and September 1933 encompassed more major aspects of life and were implemented in a more principled fashion than in any of the other new republics. For example, uniquely among the countries of southern, eastern or Latin Europe, the Republic's vision of democracy included female suffrage, despite its not entirely unjustified fear that many Spanish women were still so pious that granting them the vote would strengthen the clerical opposition. Elections were conducted honestly, without opportunistic creations of new political machines or networks of republican caciques of the type that marred Portuguese and Greek democracy. Though ultimately unsuccessful in destroying the political power of the military, the Spanish republic did more to reduce that power than any other regimes mentioned. Nor were the rights of ethnic minorities suppressed, as in Poland; instead, the provisional and Azaña governments created a new institutional framework of statutes of autonomy to accommodate Catalan and Basque regional feeling, as well as any other regional nationalisms that might become strong in the future. In the area of fundamental personal rights, full religious freedom for non-Catholics was granted for the first time in Spain's history. Divorce, improvement of the status of illegitimate children, prison reform and many other such humanitarian measures were also taken. The early republic also displayed greater concern than any other contemporaneous regime for raising the cultural level of the people; its school building programme far exceeded those of Costa and Venizelos; its *misiones pedagógicas* (pedagogical missions) – an attempt to offer mostly adult education outside the formal school network – had parallels only in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, prior to Stalin's consolidation of power.

The provisional and Azaña governments were also more sympathetic to social reform than any other of the new republics, including the Weimar and the Austrian, where socialist parties long enjoyed a stronger governmental presence than they did in Spain. Workers of all

sorts, but especially those in agriculture, where legislative neglect had previously been greatest, benefited from republican efforts to strengthen labour unions, improve wages and working conditions, and expand accident, unemployment, and other forms of social insurance. A major structural reform was broached in serious, though still cautious, legislation to redistribute significant portions of the great southern *latifundios* among landless workers. Steps were also taken, though even more timidly, toward instituting equitable lease conditions for tenant farmers and sharecroppers.⁵ The early republic's concern for social legislation did not blind it to the need for simultaneous economic modernization, as is sometimes said. Under Indalecio Prieto, the Socialist Minister of Public Works, the Azaña government articulated a programme of hydraulic works, railroad improvement, rural road building, and urban planning unmatched in Spanish history, even under the Primo de Rivera regime.

Moreover, as though these measures were insufficiently ambitious, the early republic also sought to achieve them within the context of parliamentary procedure and due legal process that constituted an essential part of its democratic ideals. These ideals were sometimes violated, in periodic censorship or suppression of the monarchist, anarchosyndicalist, and communist press. However, such actions were always ephemeral, opposition groups retained very considerable freedom of action; parliamentary debate was rarely cut off, and decree powers were relatively seldom used. The administration of governmental programmes also tended to be flexible and tolerant, with ample opportunity for the presentation of technical objections and opposition views as well as with frequent adjustments in administrative procedures to avoid unnecessary inequities. Government was thus given a new style as well as new purposes. It became more honest and responsive than it ever had been before in Spain.

WHAT MADE THESE DIFFERENCES POSSIBLE?

Why was this idealism and breadth of vision possible for the early republican leaders? Spaniards have not distinguished themselves as political paragons in most of their history, nor has Spanish republicanism – despite occasional noble figures – been immune from the narrowness, factionalism, opportunism and corruption that severely compromised the Portuguese, Greek and other contemporaneous republics. The uniqueness of the Second Republic obviously lies less in any inherent Spanish virtues than in a complex combination of circumstances that prevailed in 1931–33. These circumstances were both structural and transitory; they existed both because of factors over which the republican

leaders had no control, and for reasons for which they deserve personal credit.

Despite the many unpropitious structural problems it inherited from Spain's troubled past, the Republic was founded under much more favorable conditions than its sister republics of the 1920s and 1930s in the rest of Europe. Unlike the Weimar, Hungarian, Greek and most of the other republics mentioned, it was not born midst catastrophe, after wartime defeat, the loss of national territory, and bitter conflicts accompanied by considerable bloodshed even among groups that helped bring it into being. The birth pangs of these regimes were so traumatic that they would never entirely recover from them. Unlike its Polish or Czech counterparts, the Spanish Republic was not confronted with the debilitating and divisive task of nation building. Spain already existed as a nation within clearly defined frontiers; and although adjustments had to be made to accommodate Catalan and Basque regional sentiment, this was a problem of lesser magnitude than incorporating German, Magyar, Ukrainian and other hostile ethnic groups. Unlike Portugal, Greece, Poland, Finland or even Ireland, military groups had not played an important role in creating the Spanish republic; nor did it require, once established, a strong army to fight potential foreign enemies, as was true in most of central and eastern Europe. The San Sebastián and Azaña coalitions thus enjoyed greater freedom of action than did republican leaders elsewhere.

Spain's economy was backward, relative to northwest Europe, but more advanced than those of the other new republics except for Germany, Czechoslovakia and perhaps also Austria. Nor was it confronted by such terrifyingly difficult problems as the massive settlement of refugees posed for Greece, or the central and eastern European countries' need to readjust myriad aspects of their economic life because these had been rendered obsolete by the disappearance of state systems in conformity to which they had originally developed. What was true of Spain's economy was also true of her social structure. Less propitious for liberal democratic government than the social structures of northwest Europe, it nevertheless presented fewer obstacles than existed in most nations of Europe's southern and eastern peripheries. By 1931 there was a fairly sizeable middle class in Spain, several large urban centers with progressive political traditions, and a somewhat smaller (though still lamentable) level of illiteracy than was the norm in the rest of Europe's peripheries. Socially as well as in other ways, the Spanish republic had a larger body of potential adherents available; there was therefore less danger that it might fail to take root among a majority of the people than was true in Portugal, Greece and especially eastern Europe, where peasant populations were proportionately much larger and politically less conscious, thus acting as a brake on progressive aspirations to a much

greater extent than the peasantry did in Spain. The early Spanish republic was also spared the opposite danger, the one which helped destroy the Russian republic of February 1917 within a few months of its birth. Less universally oppressed as well as far less numerous, Spain's peasantry did not, even in Andalusia and Extremadura, which had strong and recent insurrectionary traditions, rise up in spontaneous social revolution on a scale that could engulf all of the republic's other aspirations. Full-scale peasant revolution would come only after the Civil War had started, and even then it was dependant on the coincidence of other factors.

To summarize, republics elsewhere in Europe were generally born as accidental regimes, amidst conditions of war, heavily dependent on the military, with their supporters bitterly divided, and lacking a sizeable and enlightened middle class strong enough to sustain them. These lamentable conditions also bear a significant resemblance to the conditions under which the First Spanish Republic was established sixty years earlier, in 1873, and help explain why it disintegrated almost immediately, and left a heritage which, in its shallowness, resembled that of the later eastern European regimes than it did that of the Spanish republic of the 1930s. The Second Republic was infinitely more fortunate in the circumstances of its birth than either its Spanish predecessor or its European contemporary regimes.

But favorable structural circumstances alone do not suffice to explain the noble course which the San Sebastián and Azaña coalitions marked out for the republic. There were also causes for which the early republican leadership deserves personal credit. Two such causes seem to me especially noteworthy. First, many of the republic's founders were deeply influenced by the intellectual movement that evolved, first from the mid-19th century introduction of Krausist philosophy into Spain, then from the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* (Free Educational Institution) and the writings of such regenerationists as Joaquín Costa. These strands blended together to produce a unique cultural current that might be called humanistic regenerationism. National regeneration, it insisted, if confined to economic and political modernization, was insufficient, to transform a nation. So too was humanism, if its applications were limited to interpersonal relations and scholarly pursuits. Intellectuals were morally obliged to become actively involved in politics, and they did so with increasing frequency after 1900 and especially, because of their resistance to the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, during the 1920s. Their influence reached its peak in 1930-31, when they played a major role in the collapse of the monarchy and in shaping the new republic, a role that had not been equalled in importance by intellectuals elsewhere in Europe since the revolutions of 1848. By the end of 1932, unfortunately, things began to revert to their normal course as leading figures like Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno abandoned politics. But even after leaving the

political arena, most intellectuals continued to exercise their influence on behalf of the humanistic republic they had helped define. And many other political-intellectuals – Julián Besteiro, Luis Jiménez de Asua, Fernando de los Ríos, Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, Felipe Sánchez Román, and above all, Manuel Azaña, – actively maintained the initial tradition until 1936 and even, to the extent that they could do so, during the Civil War.

A second noteworthy characteristic that made possible the unique synthesis of the early republic was the willingness of republican leaders to negotiate and compromise with each other, and the temporary absence of intransigence among them during 1931–32. Given the later polarization of Spain, this factor is often forgotten. An unusually broad spectrum of political forces had combined to overthrow the monarchy and they remained mutually conciliatory for longer than is customary in new regimes. Most significant perhaps was the extent of Socialist collaboration in laying the foundation of the new regime. Despite a few leaders who initially objected on theoretical grounds to the participation of the PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* or Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) in the cabinet, a cooperative attitude that was matched only by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Weimar Germany generally prevailed within the PSOE. Its collaboration in some ways was more complete than that of the SPD, because the humanistic regenerationist orientation that several of its leaders shared with non-socialist politicians helped forge intimate personal ties with major elements of the purely republican political elite.

It is also important to remember that the hostility of the anarchosyndicalist CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour) did not entirely nullify this advantage or create uniquely difficult conditions for the republic. Contrary to what is widely believed, the CNT for most of the republican era had a smaller following than the PSOE and its trade union, the UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*, or General Union of Workers). Moreover, its insurrectionary tactics, though unsettling, were not nearly so damaging to the Spanish republic as were the Communist attacks to the more fragile and poorly defined Weimar republic. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the sincere republicanism of rightist Catholics like Niceto Alcalá-Zamora and Miguel Maura were also major assets. Indispensable during the transitional period as guarantors of republican moderation to large sectors of the middle and upper classes, they continued to buttress the republic in lesser ways throughout its history even after breaking with the Azaña coalition over religious and other issues. Finally, the Catalan regionalist leaders also proved to be reasonable men willing to negotiate their differences with the national republican parties. Francesc Macià accepted the compromise whereby his initial proclamation of a separate

Catalan republic was withdrawn and the Catalan question was submitted to parliament. The Esquerra maintained its patience during the fifteen months required for the Cortes to reach a decision, and loyally accepted the Statute of Autonomy that finally emerged, even though it was a much diluted version of what most Catalanists had hoped for. So conciliatory a stance contrasts with the bitter conflicts engendered by the Bavarian question under the early Weimar republic, or even by the Basque question in Spain after 1975.

The willingness of the broad coalition that founded the new regime to continue to work together after its proclamation permitted the humanistic regenerationism that motivated the early leaders to plant deep roots as the fundamental mission of the republic. The consensus around this ideal was threatened in October 1931, when Alcalá-Zamora and Maura withdrew from the cabinet; in the winter of 1931–1932, when Alejandro Lleroux's Radical Party moved more openly into opposition; and again in the summer of 1932, when the Catalan statute and the Agrarian Reform bill lay paralyzed in the Cortes. But it survived each crisis, was strongly reinforced by the defeat of General Sanjurjo's attempted coup in August 1932, and did not decisively begin to disintegrate until April 1933, two full years after the proclamation of the Republic. In no other of the new European republics did the initial sense of unity predominate for so long.

This early republican consensus fell victim to a variety of factors. These included the fervent attacks by groups which had never been reconciled to the new regime – the monarchists, the CNT, and many Catholics. But more important was the disintegration of the founding coalition itself. Its synthesis was too broad, the balance of forces within it too delicate to be long maintained. Social issues, seriously aggravated by the widening impact of the world depression, provided the major source of dissension. The process was initiated during the summer of 1933 within the largest left-republican party, the Radical-Socialists, which gradually turned against the alliance of the Azaña coalition with the Socialists and began to advocate instead partnership with Lleroux's Radicals, who had been in opposition since late 1931, and were the least principled of the republican parties. This attempt to exclude from power the Socialists, already disillusioned by the slowness of social reform, set in motion a process of radicalization among them. Each group began to stress its class origins, with left republican dissidents calling for a purely middle-class government and dominant elements within the PSOE turning bitterly against all "bourgeois traitors", and moving first toward independent action, then toward alliances with the anarchists, communists and other anti-republican working class groups. The transcendence of class antagonisms, partial and incomplete though it had always been, lay at the heart of the early republican synthesis. With their resurgence,

and with the obvious decline in support for the coalition among the confused and frustrated electorate, the Azaña coalition fell apart and was driven from power between September and November of 1933.

THE REMARKABLE PERSISTENCE OF THE REPUBLIC'S INITIAL ASPIRATIONS AFTER 1933

The second half of the Republic's peacetime history was not nearly so admirable as that of its first half. Yet because it had become so deeply rooted in 1931–33, the early idealistic definition given to the Republic was able to survive to a certain extent. This too was different from the experience of most of interwar Europe, where once decline set in, it usually could not be stopped, but rapidly led to the total collapse of the republican forces and the establishment of dictatorial regimes. The continued presence of the early republican ideals during the biennium of centre-right government from November 1933 to February 1936 is evident in several ways.⁶ It caused Diego Martínez Barrio and numerous other deputies to abandon Lerroux's Radical Party in the spring of 1934, in protest against the abandonment of its long-standing leftist heritage. It affected former Radical-Socialist leaders like Félix Gordón Ordás who, having led the 1933 dissidence against the left republican-socialist alliance, moved back toward a new version of it as they became aware of the dangers of the purely middle-class government for which they had called. The continued presence of the early republican ideal, probably unfortunately, helped fortify the president of the republic, Alcalá-Zamora, in his dealings with the CEDA. Never did he allow this disparate party, in which anti-republican elements probably predominated, to acquire the ministerial posts that corresponded to the number of parliamentary seats it had won in the 1933 elections. That same presence also gave a sense of legitimacy to the strong protests, which, among the Socialists, turned into outright revolution. Another effect was that the former Azaña forces tried to prevent the granting of any ministerial power whatever to the CEDA in October 1934. All of these basically anti-democratic attitudes and activities were justified as necessary to stop a fascist takeover of power in Spain, as had just occurred in Germany and Austria. The same justification was used for the long-threatened socialist revolution in October 1934. This revolution was a fiasco in most of Spain. But this fact tended to be forgotten because of its brief triumph in the mining districts of Asturias where the special militancy that miners display throughout the world combined with local pacts that for the first time in Spain's history brought full-scale anarchosyndicalist and communist support for the socialist-led revolution.

Finally, because their earlier sense of unity had not been completely

eradicated midst the mutual recriminations of 1933, the Azaña coalition parties were able, following the savage suppression of the October 1934 revolution and the undoing of much of the Azaña era legislation in parliament during 1935, to unite together once again in the Popular Front electoral alliance.

The Popular Front's victory in the February 1936 elections did not completely restore the initial synthesis because the sharper class cleavages that had surfaced since 1931–32 could no longer be bridged to the same extent as before. The principal obstacle was the more radical, less patient mood that existed among the working classes. The Francisco Largo Caballero wing of the PSOE-UGT responded to that mood; it rejected participation in the new cabinet, and sought to create worker alliances that would replace middle-class rule. Yet Caballero and his followers were not so intransigent or violent in their actions as they were in their rhetoric. Also, the moderate wing of the PSOE led by Prieto continued to work for a renewal of left republican-working class collaboration, while the Communist Party, in accordance with the newly-adopted Kremlin policy to win support from progressive forces throughout the world against the fascist menace, opposed proletarian extremism. As the left republican groups, still headed by Azaña, were also working for restoration of the 1931–33 synthesis, a progressive but non-revolutionary republic was by no means a completely exhausted historical possibility prior to the military insurrection of July 1936 that precipitated the Civil War.

In fact the continued strength of the broad, interclass synthesis was proven by the events of July 1936. Alone among the republics of the early 20th century, the Spanish did not allow itself to be replaced by authoritarian rule without serious resistance. In part, this resistance had little to do with the old republican ideal; the anarchosyndicalists, many of the *caballeristas*, and the Communists fought against the military insurrection not because of an allegiance to the democratic Republic as such, but so as to implant their visions of social revolution. Nevertheless, the military insurrection would probably have triumphed within a few days or weeks if it had been opposed only by the most radicalized sectors of the working classes. Equally indispensable to its defeat was the resistance of the left-republican parties who controlled the Popular Front government, and of the working-class moderates who continued to believe in collaboration with the progressive middle classes. The civil war thus witnessed the birth of a new interclass synthesis. This assuredly was weaker and narrower than before due to the disappearance of many old illusions and to its more emphatically working-class orientation. But it was also broader in some ways, because it now encompassed the CNT, the Communists and the conservative Basque nationalists, all groups outside the earlier San Sebastián and Azaña coalitions.

STRUCTURAL DEFECTS AND POLICY ERRORS OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC

Because it was a very admirable regime and stands out like a pinnacle amidst Spain's unfortunate 19th and early 20th century history, not to mention the disastrous Franco dictatorship which followed it, there is a widespread tendency to exaggerate its virtues, and to consider it what has aptly been called "an immaculate virgin", without serious blemishes of any sort. This opinion is clearly mistaken. The Second Republic was indeed an extraordinary regime, worthy of the many tributes it has received since the 1930s and that it continues to receive today. But it was by no means a perfect polity; it suffered from several defects and committed many errors. These should be briefly mentioned because the excessive adoration of the Republic, while emotionally easily understandable, strikes me as politically dangerous, especially in its calls for a "Third Republic" to replace the constitutional monarchy that has governed Spain since 1976. The Second Republic is no longer as unique in Spain's history as it once was. Fortunately, it no longer constitutes the sole pinnacle of Spanish democracy. The external form of this democracy changed when a constitutional monarchy rather than a republic emerged from the democratic transition that followed Franco's death. Far more important than political forms, however, is the political spirit that underlies them. Spain's republican heritage permeates every aspect of the present constitutional monarchy's spirit. Different on the surface, the republic and the constitutional monarchy are siblings in their essence.

Those who advocate establishment of a "Third Republic" are profoundly mistaken in my opinion, and suffer from what I would call "republicanolatry" – a naïve belief that the Second Republic approached perfection in every important way and that its ultimate collapse was due solely to the revolt of its military forces and to the lamentable world situation of the 1930s, when the fascist forces were so strong, while those of the democratic powers were so ineffective. This is true, but represents only one part of the truth. Admirable though it was, the Second Republic nevertheless undermined itself and peripherally contributed to its own demise. In closing, let me mention some of the ways in which this was true.

DISINTEGRATION AND DEFECTS OF THE REPUBLIC

With the beginning of the decline of the Azaña coalition in January 1933, several defects of the Republic began to assume importance. Some of these defects had existed since the beginning and others were recent, having emerged as a result of the process of disintegration. The most

important structural defect, one that would harm the Republic throughout its entire existence, represents the obverse side of one of the Republic's greatest virtues, its extraordinary ambition, its determination to immediately transform so many fundamental aspects of Spanish life. In its eagerness for sweeping change, the Azaña coalition of left republicans and socialists, which governed from October 1931 to September 1933 and which for most observers constitutes the core of the Republic along with the provisional government that preceded it (April–October 1931) took on more tasks than even the most powerful and efficient regimes could hope to fulfil by peaceful, parliamentary means. By attacking all problems simultaneously, the Republic raised expectations it could not satisfy and needlessly swelled the ranks of its enemies. By not completing many of the reforms it initiated, it disillusioned many of its supporters. The agrarian reform, a centerpiece of the Azaña coalition's programme, illustrates this point. After arousing great hopes it was so underfinanced and poorly administered that it ended up alienating the Socialist Party and most of the other groups it was supposed to benefit.

Especially damaging was the decision to give religious reform, which offended the Catholic Church and its millions of adherents, the same high level of priority as social and political reform. Social reform was unquestionably urgent, both to retain the loyalty of the Socialist Party, a mainstay of the Republic, and to prevent working-class conflict from undermining the new regime as it had periodically undermined the monarchy. Political reform was also urgent, both to satisfy the left-wing Catalan party, *Esquerra de Catalunya*, another of the Republic's fundamental supports, as well as to ensure the democratic and effective functioning of the new regime. There was no urgent need for religious reform, however, despite the fact that the Church hierarchy declared its opposition and sought to turn its followers against the Republic from the start. But the hierarchy did not break tradition and encourage its millions of adherents to use violent means, thus giving the new regime ample time to counteract Church propaganda. The Church constituted a long range, not an imminent, threat to the Republic's plans for a more modern, and therefore more secular, society. Its enormous social and cultural influence could safely be whittled away piece by piece over the years. There was no need for an immediate or total confrontation. Some reforms, like those granting full toleration to Protestant denominations, can be rationally justified, especially since they no longer provoked intense opposition from the hierarchy. But I see no rational justification for other measures, especially the May 1933 laws which severely restricted, and sought eventually to abolish, the extensive network of Catholic schools. Such extreme measures chiefly reflected the intense anticlericalism that had embedded itself within the republican and most other modernizing movements since the late 18th century because of the deeply reactionary policies the

Church had adopted against almost all political, social and cultural change. Wounded by the multiple indignities they had suffered at the hands of the Church in the past, the republicans found it difficult to be generous toward their old enemy now that the tables had finally turned. Except for their desire for progress and modernization on various fronts, anticlericalism was the lowest common denominator among the republican parties, the factor that most often bound them together. Moreover, it linked them to the working-class organizations, which had also learned to be anticlerical due to the solipsistic and reactionary policies the Church had followed for so long. The diverse parties in the Azaña coalition might disagree on Catalan autonomy, the degree of social reform that should be pursued, and other important issues, but they tended to agree that Church influence should be restricted – restricted, not abolished, although a few of the measures adopted headed in that direction.

Another defect of the republicans is that they were better legislators than administrators. This, of course, was another inevitable consequence of having chosen to institute change on so many fronts at once. There is also the partial excuse that they had very little time in which to put their programmes into effect once the necessary legislation had been approved. The important Agrarian Reform Law of September 1932 again provides an example; the Azaña coalition had only one year to administer it before surrendering office to a center-right coalition which was less sympathetic, or perhaps even hostile, to its goals.

The republicans were especially deficient in their understanding of fiscal matters. In the Agrarian Reform Law, for example, they rejected sophisticated proposals to acquire land for the landless indirectly through taxation, rather than by seizing it directly from its owners. The budget allotted for the redistribution of the millions of hectares required for the reform was ridiculously low for such a gigantic task – less than half the amount assigned to the Civil Guard. A few positive fiscal reforms were adopted under the Republic, to be sure, but the most important of these, the institution of Spain's first income tax, was so timid that it scarcely mattered.

A more serious defect of the left republicans and socialists united in the Azaña coalition was that they were excessively possessive guardians of the new regime. To some extent this was a natural reaction to Spain's disheartening recent history. So many promising initiatives had been destroyed in the past by hidden enemies just as they were beginning to take root that the Azaña forces felt that the Republic had to remain in their hands to guarantee its survival. Other groups, even Lerroux's Radical Party and the conservative republicans who had formed part of the founding coalition, were not to be trusted. This attitude became especially prevalent after the November 1933 elections when large sectors of the Azaña forces questioned the legitimacy of the center-right victory in

the polls. And, as mentioned earlier, it took a disastrous turn when the socialists decided to fight against the transfer of power with a “revolutionary general strike” in October 1934. This sought to overthrow the new center-right government and install a leftist regime in which the working class rather than the progressive middle-class parties would be predominant. The socialists justified this revolt by pointing to what had happened in Germany and Austria during 1933–34, when supposedly moderate right-wing governments had opened the way for fascist seizures of power.

There was some truth in their charge, of course, but an even more important truth was that by their insurrection the socialists undermined the democratic foundations of the Republic and justified similar actions by the most reactionary forces in Spain. Does this mean that the socialists, despite their usual rhetoric, were in fact anti-democratic in nature, thus dooming the Republic from within? Several factors must be kept in mind. The insurrection was no accident, nor something advocated by only a small sector of the movement. It enjoyed wide support, both among the leadership and the rank and file members. On the other hand, except in a single region, Asturias, most socialists did not rally to the revolt, thus ensuring its failure. Also, although the Catalan government stumbled into a farcical mini-revolt of its own, the middle-class parties of the Azaña coalition did not abandon their democratic heritage and refused to support the socialist insurrection. It should also be noted that the uneven, almost contradictory response of the center-right government in power to the insurrection heightened some of its worst effects. There was a needlessly savage suppression of the revolt in Asturias, but some of the revolt’s main leaders, especially Largo Caballero, were treated too mildly. Had a consistently moderate policy been followed by the government, the long-term impact of the rebellion might have been lessened. But as it was, the abortive October 1934 revolution proved disastrous for the Republic.

Spain now began to follow the downward path that characterized almost all of its fellow republics in interwar Europe. Politically and socially, it became far more profoundly polarized than before. Most of the benefits the Republic brought were soon superseded by the new divisions that had arisen. And these divisions were no longer mainly between right and left, but now also tore apart the left itself. Because of the split between the working and the progressive middle classes, for which the Largo Caballero wing of the Socialist movement was principally responsible, the left and centre-left could not make good usage of their victory in the elections of February 1936. The heritage of their united past was still strong enough to permit the formation of Popular Front governments, but the dissensions within these, together with their inability to control popular violence from either working-class or fascist groups,

soon created conditions of sufficient chaos to provide the military officers who, under the surface, had long been conspiring against the Republic, an excuse for their insurrection of 18 July 1936, which plunged Spain into a catastrophic civil war. The uniqueness of the Republic continued to be apparent to a considerable extent during the war. Alone among its contemporaries, it had enough support among the people to be able to prevent the immediate victory of the military insurrection and to resist its final triumph for three years. Although internal dissensions among the progressive republican forces continued to exist and contributed significantly to the republic's final defeat, we should also remember that sufficient cooperation among them also existed to enable them to become such powerful opponents of the Franco forces.

CONCLUSION

Given the terrible price exacted by the Civil War and by the seemingly endless Franco dictatorship that followed, one can argue that it would have been better for Spain had its republic been more like those of other European countries in the interwar period – mediocre regimes with limited, single-class aspirations that could not seriously resist efforts to overthrow them precisely because they never developed deep roots among sufficiently broad segments of their populations.

But had this been the case (and there were several moments, especially in 1931, when the Republic might have followed an entirely different evolution), then Spain's history would have been poorer and more ignominious. Rather than a source of inspiration and pride, as the provisional government, Azaña and some aspects of the Popular Front phases of the republic remain today for many persons both inside and outside Spain, it would have been forgotten by all except professional historians. That is the fundamental explanation of the crowds that attended the Tarragona Colloquium in 1981 which inspired the thoughts I have expressed here. The Spanish Republic ultimately failed, as did fourteen of the fifteen republics established in Europe between 1910 and 1931. But its failure was a noble one, which left an important heritage of idealistic reformism that helped guide Spain during its wonderfully successful transition to democracy that has finally lifted it, hopefully permanently, from the ranks of troubled and insecure polities, and brought it an unprecedented stability and prosperity.

Notes

- 1 On Portugal, see Douglas L. Wheeler, *Republican Portugal: A Political History, 1910–1926* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
- 2 On Poland's and the other eastern European republics, see Joseph Rothschild's wonderfully succinct chapters in his *East Central Europe between*

the Two World Wars (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974).

- 3 On Greece, see George Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- 4 On the Weimar Republic, see Erich Eyck, *History of the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 5 On the agrarian reform, see my book *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970).
- 6 On the centrist parties, see Nigel Townson, *The Crisis of Democracy in Spain: Centrist Politics under the Second Republic, 1931–1936* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000).