

***A Unifying Enlightenment.
Institutions of Political Economy
in Eighteenth-Century Spain (1700–1808)***

Jesús Astigarraga
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The core of this monograph was recently submitted as a PhD dissertation by the author, the well-known economic historian Jesús Astigarraga, who already had a PhD in Economics in 1991. The list of his publications on the Enlightenment and economic thought takes pp. 293–95 of the bibliography (twenty-five items). Unlike most PhD dissertations, this book sums up the investigations of a lifetime. And it does so with a self-assured tone that is unusual in this kind of book. The broader framework is a historical understanding of the emergence of political economy as an autonomous discipline in Europe and Spain in the eighteenth century. For the Bourbon monarchy, the emergence of political economy implied the transformation of knowledge of trade into a consistent vision of the state's role in promoting the nation's collective well-being. Politics as a plan to shape social reality was a crucial factor of eighteenth-century political economy. The period covered in the book goes from Felipe V's Regency in 1700 to the abdication of Carlos IV in 1808.

In the Introduction, Astigarraga gives an overview of the recent trends in the international discussion on political economy and the Enlightenment. His approach is based on a close analysis of the institutions that were created in Spain and that were active through education and print culture to spread three significant innovations: the notion of economic growth, techniques necessary to rational management of state finances, the promotion of the accumulation of economic knowledge, and a better understanding of what political economy was about. Throughout his book, Astigarraga focuses mainly on those public institutions related to economic policies that were the expression of society and were acknowledged by the public power. He agrees with, among others, Joel Mokyr and John Robertson on the importance of economic institutions and the interplay between economic institutions and economic ideas. So, if a straightforward question can point to the crux of Astigarraga's perspective, it would be: how did the notion (and desirability) of economic growth emerge in eighteenth-century Spain?

Astigarraga takes political economy as a connecting discourse within the European Enlightenment to answer this question. There are obviously good reasons for this move. Embracing political economy fostered the emergence of secularism and justified commercial competition (what David Hume called the ‘jealousy of trade’ in 1758) between imperial powers as an alternative to constant warfare. In the Spanish case, humanitarianism went hand in hand with the centralisation of state intervention as a central feature of the Enlightenment. Regionalism and fiscal fragmentation were perceived as obstacles to be overcome in the Spanish political economy. According to Astigarraga, the Spanish version of the Enlightenment had as its key program the homogenising process of its heterogeneous parts while increasing its well-being and wealth creation.

The book presents itself as an investigation inspired by Franco Venturi’s view of the Enlightenment as a process of constant blending of cosmopolitan and universal values and local and patriotic aspirations to increase wealth and security. The book emphasises the interaction and circulation of ideas and practical examples.

The first three chapters focus on the treatises written in the first half of the eighteenth century to provide practical tools for traders involved in transregional exchanges. The point is to emphasise the fragmentation of the Spanish peninsula: internal borders implied hurdles to smooth commercial activity, and handbooks supported the spread of a vision of trade as a distinguished and valuable contribution to the nation’s prosperity. The creation of the *Discursos Mercuriales* in 1752 marked the beginning of a new and modernising form of communication between state administrators and the ‘educated public.’ Both would profit from this semipublic space (49). The *Discursos Mercuriales* indeed contributed significantly to argue that Spain should become a ‘commercial monarchy’ (67) and enter the fray with the European powers that had started their modernisation earlier than the mid-eighteenth century. The complex process of initiating a public sphere interested in the diffusion of the new science of economics implied that knowledgeable journalists would come to the forefront, despite unfavourable conditions (they had to deal with double preventative censorship, civil and episcopal). In a very detailed analysis of the economic press after the end of the Seven Years’ War, the author focuses on the ideas, recommendations, and innovations that the Spanish journalists, Nifo, Saura, Barberi among others, took from the major French and English periodical publications of the 1760s and 1770s. Summaries, partial and integral translations, and adaptations of foreign texts contributed to shaping a new attitude in political economy.

Chapter 4 focuses on the dissemination of useful knowledge through the periodic press. The role played by economic societies in promoting the Spanish press is duly investigated. Astigarraga makes an interesting point when he mentions that the Economic Society of Madrid was given the function of censoring the economic press (112). Vasconcelos became the censor of the *Semanario económico* in 1777. The role of the Economic Society of Madrid and the censors was remarkable in encouraging some journals to be published and in making life difficult for others, like the *Semanario*

económico itself (112–13). Unfortunately, the implications of being active as a censor and promoting freedom of expression and ‘enlightenment’ (115) are not further explored.

The fifth chapter deals with the genre of dictionaries specialised in commerce and political economy. In Spain they contributed to introducing economic concepts into the language, including neologisms like competition and economists (120). They were crucial in developing general notions about economic life from the more traditional notions of trade (122). Only a politically organised society could promote its members’ well-being and foster wealth creation. There were obstacles on the way to creating a new philosophical language. After difficult beginnings, the commerce dictionaries entered a new phase in the 1770s following Campomanes’s intervention, but these exertions also failed to really materialise. Campomanes looms large in this chapter as the driving force behind these efforts to modernise Spanish cultural life. He recommended reading the volumes of the *Encyclopédie des arts et métiers* edited by Diderot and d’Alembert, despite the General Inquisitor banning it in the Spanish Monarchy in 1759 (143).

Chapter 6 is about the golden age of the Spanish press: 1780s to 1808. Astigarraga outlines the social core of the ‘enlightened public opinion’ and its premises: among them, the better general education of an expanding population, and the profitability of the literary career, based on the increasing success of the subscription system (146–48). More than in the recent past, freedom of opinion and expression was vindicated within the framework of a philosophical argument about the advantages of freedom of the press. In fact, in tune with most Catholic countries in the eighteenth century, freedom of the press was achieved not by abolishing preventative censorship but by shifting the balance between civil power and the Inquisition. Centralising control over the publication of Spanish books in the hands of the Council of Castile (150) was instrumental in broadening the scope of economic discussions. A detailed analysis of one of the most significant monthly publications in economics, the *Memorial literario*, proves this point (156–72), for instance when the *Memorial literario* came to discuss the consequences of the agrarian reform and agricultural individualism.

In the late 1780s, two periodicals, *El Correo de Madrid o de los Ciegos* and the *Espíritu de los mejores diarios literarios* epitomised the achievements of the Spanish Enlightenment to create a public sphere in the sense of Habermas.

Part of creating a public sphere interested in the new science of political economy was the foundation of chairs in civil economy and commerce. The first one to be established was in Saragossa in 1784 (194). According to the author (and it is hard to disagree), ‘the chair was an institutional creation, prompted and managed by the government and essentially aimed at recruiting future civil servants and statesmen and using new educational material that could be standardised’ (201). In general, the support (or lack of it) from the government was a crucial factor in the success of political economy, as testified by the resistance of the Inquisition to the new science

and the active role of several public figures in pushing back the ecclesiastical interference.

Chapter 9 covers the subject of merchants' handbooks throughout the eighteenth century, while chapter 10 deals with the specialised economic press of the very final years of the Spanish Enlightenment: the *Correo Mercantil* and the *Semanario de Agricultura*. Both came to an end in 1808. With the analysis of these two periodicals, the monograph ends.

Before commenting on the issues raised by Astigarraga, it is fitting to remark that this is a solid, source-based treatment of an essential period of Spanish history in the eighteenth century. As the author acknowledges in the preliminary note, 'the book is the result of a research process of *longue durée*' (xi). As a consequence, the author could not avoid repetitions, both conceptual and argumentative: for instance, the same information about Morellet's *Prospectus* is mentioned in different contexts almost verbatim. However, a perplexing inaccuracy concerns the foundation of three chairs of political economy, respectively in 1754 (Naples) and 1779 (Palermo and Catania) 'in the Regno delle Due Sicilie,' at a time when the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Regno delle Due Sicilie) did not exist yet (it was founded on December 8, 1816, in the wake of the Congress of Vienna) (195). The author states again (202) that Carlo di Borbone arrived in the Regno delle Due Sicilie in 1739.

In the Epilogue (260–70), Astigarraga makes an overall assessment of the historical significance of Spanish political economy in the eighteenth century, from the perspective of two major issues. The first one regards the nature of the Enlightenment. Astigarraga does not give a preliminary definition of the Enlightenment: that Spain connected to the European Enlightenment is implied in his approach. The reader, however, perceives clearly that Astigarraga has a broad understanding of the different shades of enlightened thinking. In the Epilogue he flatly rejects Jonathan Israel's assumption that the radical Enlightenment was a different and more authentic form of Enlightenment than the mainstream Enlightenment of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Condillac, Locke, Newton, and Hume, who, according to Israel, rejected the main line of egalitarian, democratic, republican, and anti-colonial thought. In Spain, modernisation was possible only through a collaboration with a section of the monarchical apparatus: no monarchy, no modernisation.

[...] the Spanish enlightenment had no need to base itself on an 'abstract theory of basic values' that were rational, secular, and materialist [...] in order to develop regalist policies, eliminate privileges, combat the power of the Church, open up participation in the public sphere, activate the circulation of 'useful' writings, found new centers of learning, promote the press, contribute to the professionalization of men of letters and the secularization of art and its representations, support trade's good repute and university education (262–63).

A crucial part of the broad and open-ended notion of Enlightenment entertained by Astigarraga concerns political economy and the institutions created to familiarise the Spanish reading public with its theoretical innovations and practical recommendations.

‘These transforming initiatives pointed in the directions of modernity, and political economy and its institutions played an irreplaceable role’ (263). This statement leads us to the second general point raised by the author in the Epilogue: the legacy of the Enlightenment in the nineteenth century. The importance of the political economy of the Enlightenment to Spanish modernisation is undeniable, according to Astigarraga. It became evident in the Liberal Triennium from 1820 to 1823, ‘one of Spain’s great periods’ (270), and it provided the nineteenth century with a sound basis for modernity by dismantling essential features of the old regime and breaking the ground for a new social, political, and economic setup. Hopefully, this transition will be the subject of Astigarraga’s next book.