

Henry Kamen. *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763*. New York: Perennial/Harper Collins, 2004. (1<sup>st</sup> edition – London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2002). ISBN: 978-0060932640. Pp. xxviii, 609. Paperback. £12.77.

- Tell me, what do you see?  
- I see rooftops. I see palaces, I see towers, I see spires that reach... to the sky! I see civilisation!  
- All of them built by people like me. No matter how long you live, Sanchez, there is something that will never change between us... I did it. You didn't.<sup>1</sup>

This fictional dialogue between the Genoese Cristóbal Colón and a Spanish- Castilian minister conveys, with the dramatic lyricism appropriate in a popular movie epic about the discovery of the Americas, the idea which forms the core argument of Henry Kamen's provocative study of the Spanish empire, one of several penned by him.<sup>2</sup> The thematic core of this book is the essence and meaning of empire, as exemplified by the largest such formation of the early modern period. At the same time, it is not so much about Spain itself, as the author readily admits. [p. xxiv] As we shall see, the observations made within the context of this paradigm, whether we agree with them or not, are equally applicable to any empire. This book aspired to be a novel and provocative contribution to the ways we see empires in general, and early modern empires in particular, and it is an analysis of early modern empires which is still influential today, especially in the context of independence movements in Spain and abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, dir. by Ridley Scott (Paramount Pictures, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> The volume under review appeared also with the title *Spain's Road to Empire: The Making of a World Power, 1492-1763* (London, New York, etc: Penguin, 2003). Other similar works by Kamen are: *Spain, 1469-1714: A Society on Conflict* (London & New York: Longman, 1983); *Imagining Spain: Historical Myth and National Identity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008); *Crisis and Change in Early Modern Spain* (Aldershot & Brookfield: Variorum, 1993).

Kamen gives out elements of his working definition of 'empire' in various parts of his work. To him it is a territorial, multinational, multiethnic state, which in essence revolves around property - over people, resources and most of all of land. Certainly this is not new in the discourse of empire, despite examples of empires where territory was not the dominant parameter (the Portuguese or the Dutch empire). Where Kamen differs is in his suggestion that an empire is the result of an equal collaboration (presumably unconscious) of its *naciones*, and that one people can not claim it as its own. In short, the Spanish empire is not Spanish, because Spain was but one of the collaborators in its creation. 'Spaniards', he writes, 'particularly Castilians, Basques and Andalusians, made their own distinctive contribution, and enjoyed the honour of being managers of the enterprise. But the enterprise itself belongs to all.' [p. 493]

If stating the obvious is less of an issue, a problem which immediately arises when Kamen proceeds to his analysis is one of consistency. For reasons which will soon become apparent, Kamen clearly elects Castile as his *bête noire*. He readily, and somewhat artificially, divides the Spanish Iberians and their respective contribution to empire building where it suits his argument, observing, for example, with an air of insinuated importance that Philip IV's army in Aragon in 1643 consisted by at least a half of Aragonese, Valencians, Neapolitans, Walloons, etc (p. 488). Yet at the same time, in attempting to illustrate the ideological domination of the concept of a Spanish empire, he presents us with quotes from Frey Benito de Peñalosa, who speaks of Spaniards in a much more inclusive way than Kamen himself, and usually denotes thus Iberians in general. It is this artificial division into two which makes Kamen's argument weak and inconsistent. It would have been, perhaps, more useful to make a division of three (if that task has a meaning at all), based on relative

power distribution and potential for influence: Castilians and their immediate subjects (say, Andalusians); Iberians enjoying significant autonomy (Aragonese, and later, Portuguese, to an extent) and the élites of European dominions (Italian factions, Flemish nobility), that is, forces with potential to influence policy; and the overseas dominions, whose contribution, though very real and essential in both monetary and ideological terms, remained largely an abstract in empire-building politics.

Deconstructions such as the one the author attempts are certainly useful in exploring some themes – when comparing relative strengths and weaknesses in the interior, assessing the empire's cohesion, analyzing the effectiveness of integration, political or other. Invaluable it would be again as a starting point in exploring the particulars of internal balance of power, political trade-off as a feature of a nascent 'absolutism', the *quid pro quo* between administrative centre and local privilege. But why deconstruct when speaking of an empire as a whole, or of its impact? Why forcefully hammer down the obvious and uncontested, as if from a tribune?

Kamen's views are often considered controversial, and containing a great deal of politicised argumentation, sometimes subtle, sometimes much more vivid and provocative.<sup>3</sup> That the work has a political agenda is evident and even more or less explicitly stated (p. xxiii). That it is not immediate and active advocacy of Catalanist ideology, but a more passive and subversive strike against Castilianism (either extreme or mild) and a pan-Spanish perception, does not make it less biased.

It has been suggested that Kamen, with personal and familial links to Catalonia, where he lives and works, often tries to put historical

scholarly methodology of which he is a masterful user, in the service of a specific anti-Castilianism fashionable among modern advocates of the *Catalanismo* ideology. In a sense this work is a historical justification of the political deconstruction advocated by the *Catalanismo* movement in modern and contemporary Spain, as much as similar works elsewhere discuss Latin American political breach with the historical metropolis, Scottish and Irish – with the British tradition, and that of former Soviet or Eastern European socialist states – with their Russian-dominated past.

Certainly ethnic Spaniards, more so, ethnic Castilians, did not build the Spanish empire single-handedly. What Kamen denies to the Spanish however, brushing it off as unimportant, is the significance in the balance of things of the leading role in administration and coordination, in defining and directing policy, in administering manpower and resources, wherever they come from, in imposing (or negotiating) Spanish will upon subject territories and dominions. Kamen's argument could hold water when speaking of the Union of the Crowns of Castile and Aragon – a true collaboration between two monarchies unified dynastically, but separate administratively. It could hold water, though somewhat tentatively, for the times of Charles V, even though one might retort that the Spanish empire was not yet in place, at least not until the final stages of his reign. But as soon as Philip II's program of bureaucratization and gradual centralization is in place, Kamen's argument begins to disintegrate. Not only did Spain (and more so, Castile) become the truly dominant force in the empire, but in some cases, notably, during Philip II's reign, the insistence of the administration to settle all issues at the central seat of government, in the Madrid councils or at the Escorial, was such that created massive problems of crisis management.

Once at the head of an empire the Spanish monarchs and their ministers struggled to preserve it as the proverbial Hapsburg patrimony of Charles V; or augment it (conquest of Portugal and its dominions, or the Philippines); fight for (Philip IV's push towards the retention of Portugal in the mid XVII

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Mauricio Tenorio, 'Henry Kamen. Imagining Spain: Historical Myth and National Identity', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 82, No. 2: The Persistence of Religion in Modern Europe (June 2010), pp. 487-488; M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado, 'Philip II of Spain by Henry Kamen', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 113, No. 454 (Nov., 1998), pp. 1256-1258; Richard L. Kagan, 'Philip of Spain by Henry Kamen', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (Jun., 1998), pp. 912-913 and others..

century); and push it forward into a new age (Bourbon social reforms and administrative restructuring). That the kings of Spain were doing it using soldiers of many nations, ships with masts from the Baltic, money from Italian bankers, and administrators with familial or other ties to non-Iberian Spanish dominions is as irrelevant as it is analogous of other such experiences in any state, be it a realm, republic or empire. In the end, it was all in the name of the Spanish King and in the service of the Spanish central government, the top of the administrative hierarchy, a hierarchy complex, to be sure, but controlled by, and in the service of, Castilian (or broader Iberian) *élites*.

It is not, however, just the ‘who paid for what’ issue, nor whether the hand that wielded, figuratively speaking, the sword of empire was in reality Portuguese, Andalusian, Flemish or *mestizo*. In a very real sense, it is also the outward image which plays a significant part here, whether the empire projected an image connected with a particular nation (the imperial nation, if you will). That the tercios of the Army of Flanders were predominantly non-Castilian, and even non-Spanish, did not matter to the Dutch, who spoke of Spaniards, Spanish power, Spanish victories and Spanish defeats. That viceroys and ambassadors, ministers and tradesmen might come from Italy, Aragon, Valencia, Navarra or Andalusia, made little difference to their counterparts, who saw them as agents of Spain and Spain’s rulers. That bankers were German, Flemish, Genoese or Florentine did not change the colour of their gold, nor the goals for which it was earmarked. Finally, that arguably the most feared and celebrated of Spain’s rulers, Philip II, was by birth half-Austro-Flemish and half-Portuguese did not change in the imagination and perception of both contemporaries and historians, his identity as the most Spanish of the Spanish kings.

In the end, if we are to use Henry Kamen’s argumentation in a lighter tone, we might ask ourselves – is this book really Henry Kamen’s? Because after all, he did not produce the paper it is printed on, nor the ink it is printed in, nor did he perform the actual printing, binding or even funding of it. Yet it is the idea that matters, and how it is developed, and by whom.

In the case of Kamen’s book, as well as the Spanish or any other empire.

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