

2012

Review of: Justo Serna y Anacleto Pons, *Los Triunfos del Burgués. Estampas valencianas del ochocientos*

Jesus Cruz

University of Delaware, jesus@udel.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Cruz, Jesus (2012) "Review of: Justo Serna y Anacleto Pons, *Los Triunfos del Burgués. Estampas valencianas del ochocientos*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 1 , Article 31.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol37/iss1/31>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Justo Serna y Anacleto Pons, *Los Triunfos del Burgués. Estampas valencianas del ochocientos*. Valencia: Tirant Humanidades, 2012. 272 pp.

This engaging new book by Justo Serna and Anacleto Pons is a study of nineteenth-century bourgeois lifestyles and civilization with the city of Valencia as its main scenario. While the study has a regional framework, this is not a work of local history. The authors present their research on the region of Valencia as a case study that exemplifies the general history of the European bourgeois experience. They conceive Valencia as a European territory and posit that the developments they analyze could have occurred in many other cities of nineteenth-century Europe.

Nor is *Los triunfos del burgués* a conventional academic book. It is written in a literary style with no citations. The authors present a collection of scenes that illustrate different aspects of the social, cultural, economic, and political life of the city with its business groups as protagonists. The reader will find biographical accounts, institutional study, prosopography, economic analysis, and cultural history all presented with admirable erudition and a fluid prose exempt of jargon that makes it enjoyable reading. It is a book that condenses the knowledge accumulated in a series of publications over the last two decades, a product of the long research trajectory of the authors. Information previously collected is now combined, contrasted, and placed in an innovative interdisciplinary framework.

Serna and Pons use a Sombartian approach to define “bourgeois” and “bourgeoisie.” They include in that category the urban social groups that engaged in mercantile and industrial activities. Their main purpose is to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the lifestyle of these groups, a lifestyle that, according to the authors, became dominant over the course of the nineteenth century and shaped the present day world. In Valencia that process of ascendancy took off during the years of the *Decada Moderada* (1844-54) and was definitively established by the beginning of the twentieth century. In that long and gradual transition the bourgeois of Valencia built and imposed a cultural system that combined local, national, and international features. The society of Valencia, like many other Western societies, experienced a process of embourgeoisement with a long-standing impact.

Within this general framework the authors transport the reader back and forth through a variety of scenarios of nineteenth-century Valencian bourgeois life. The most symbolic among these is the Valencia Regional Exposition of 1909, an event that the authors introduce at the beginning of the book, though it occurred at the end of the chronological sequence that is their object of study. The Exposition, an impressive display aimed at the glorification of modernity, synthesizes the nineteenth-century bourgeois universe as it was molded by the city's dominant groups. All elements of bourgeois life were embodied by the Exposition: the city's commercial and mercantile elites who organized the event, the display of material culture aimed to celebrate the benefits of capitalism and liberalism, and the well thought-out program of social ceremonies to entertain the members of Valencian polite society. The Exposition was also a demonstration of regional sentiment. The bourgeois of Valencia imagined their community to be one with strong regional traits but, at the same time, an integral part of the new Spanish liberal state and connected to the central government of Madrid.

The bulk of the book is a meticulous sociological analysis of the mercantile and industrial families of nineteenth-century Valencia. With an extraordinary amount of data from notarial and family archives, the authors provide details about their social origins, the nature and performance of their businesses, the characteristics of their social life, and the impact they made in the modernization of the city and the region. The social ascent and access to power of the new bourgeois groups was possible due to the political changes in Spain after 1833. The case of Valencia shows that the liberal reforms brought about a greater dynamism in social and economic life in the provinces than in Madrid, based on historical findings about this period.

The bourgeoisie of Valencia as described by Serna and Pons was essentially commercial, with a small but significant group of industrialists whose business was the production of silk fabrics. Unlike the case of Catalonia, the majority of members of that social conglomerate were not born in the city or the region of Valencia rather they came to the city from other parts of Spain and Europe. They achieved their domination by creating solid networks of family connections and sophisticated systems of patronage. In the process of establishing domination the bourgeois of Valencia carried out economic, political, and social exchanges with the old aristocracy. They were politically diverse but socially cohesive, sharing similar family values, religious beliefs, consumer attitudes, cultural preferences, and social manners. They were indeed, with their particularities, a segment of the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie.

Like any piece of research, Serna and Pons's book is not exempt of some minor flaws and controversial points. In this case I find a pair that concerns the scope of the story told and the treatment of the case study. First, while the authors do a good job of placing the case of Valencia bourgeois society in the general context of the European bourgeois experience, comparative references to other cases within Spain are scarce. The book would be enhanced by a chapter or a section contrasting the bourgeois experience of Valencia with the experiences of other nineteenth-century Spanish bourgeoisies. Second, I find the historical account to be excessively enclosed in the chronology of the nineteenth century. Main events treated start in in the 1830s and end around 1900. The reader senses the lack of historical perspective in some instances, for example, there could have been a discussion about the changes that occurred in the social landscape of Valencia during the transition from the Old Regime to the consolidation of the Liberal State.

Notwithstanding these debatable aspects, *Los triunfos del burgués* is one more impressive piece of scholarship –provided by two scholars whom I consider to be at present the main specialists in the social and cultural history of nineteenth-century Spain.

Jesus Cruz
University of Delaware