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Spain's 'national character' in *The Economist*

Abstract

The image of a country conveyed by the international media is increasingly important in a globalised and interdependent world. Some of these international outlets have a special role to play in this process, and the British weekly *The Economist* is certainly one of them. For more than a century and a half, the publication founded by James Wilson in 1843 has been a reference for politicians, opinion leaders and businessmen around the world. For this reason, it is of particular interest to understand the magazine's special way of contextualising news events in different latitudes from the perspective of each country's 'national character.' From this perspective, we analyze the image of Spain offered by *The Economist* throughout its history from the understanding of the interest that has always had for the professionals of the British weekly the interpretation of current affairs in the context of the so-called 'national character' of a country. After the thematic analysis of nine supplements on Spain published by the weekly between 1972 and 2018, six features have been highlighted that would consistently configure the 'national character' of this country for the weekly. These six traits are: a country in transition; a diverse country; a festive, hospitable and tolerant country; a country with an inefficient administration; a country with a weak economy; and an artistic and unscientific country. A better understanding of these stable features can be of great importance for better managing a country's international projection.

Keywords

***The Economist*, country image, media coverage, national character, image of Spain.**

1. Introduction

The image of countries on the international scene is largely constructed through the representation in the international media of their identity traits –long-standing stereotypes and traits more closely linked to specific historical situations (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Sierp & Karner, 2017). Among the handful of global journalistic brands that have this power to shape the country-image, the British weekly *The Economist* is undoubtedly one of the most influential, and has been so for many decades (Dudley Edwards, 1993; Arrese, 1995; Zevin, 2019). The magazine founded by James Wilson in 1843 is read and respected in all corridors of political and economic power, and nothing reflects this better than the fact that when a country is the subject of some in-depth analysis by the publication, that coverage makes national media headlines. This is clearly the case in a country like Spain, where almost every time the British magazine reports on a current issue, its opinion is widely commented on by the journalistic world (Cano, 2010).

Many studies on Spain's image, such as those carried out by the Elcano Royal Institute, have included *The Economist* among the list of media whose content is analysed to evaluate the projection of Spain abroad (Noya, 2002; Chislett, 2008; Ramírez, 2014; Vázquez Barrio, 2019). Rarely, however, has the particular way in which this weekly has dealt with our country's issues been analysed. From an economic perspective, Pujol made some approximations to the presence of Spain in the magazine (both in terms of the number of articles and the references to the Spanish economy in the tables and graphs published), verifying that its news value had increased significantly between 1975 and 2000 (Pujol, 2002, 2003). More in line with the analysis of national stereotypes, such as those carried out by Noya (2003), Cano Jiménez (2010) recently looked at the image of Spain in *The Economist* in the first years (2008–2009) of the economic and financial crisis, noting that the intense coverage of those years by the weekly had enormous difficulties in overcoming the 'everlasting clichés' linked to 'Spain is different.'

2. Objective and structure

This paper aims to delve deeper into the image of Spain offered by *The Economist* throughout its history –and especially in the last half century– based on an understanding of the interest that the professionals of the weekly have always had, especially following the work of its most famous editor, Walter Bagehot, in the interpretation of current affairs in the context of the so-called 'national characters' of countries. Based on the concept of 'national character,' and conducting a thematic content analysis of some of the magazine's most extensive works on Spain, this study attempts to define the main features of the Spanish 'character' conveyed by *The Economist* in a consistent way to its global audience. To this end, we will first address the peculiar way of understanding the concept of 'national character' in the second half of the 19th century, when Walter Bagehot stamped many of his articles in the weekly with his personal label of analysis of the idiosyncrasies of different countries, and how *The Economist* adopted this style of contextualising international events from then onwards, with special references to the Spanish case. Subsequently, taking advantage of the fact that this journalistic approach was clearly deployed in the special reports (*surveys*) on countries that the magazine has published regularly since the 1950s, the nine *surveys* published on Spain between 1972 and 2018 will be analysed. The focus of this analysis will be on the references to features of the 'national character,' in the sense understood by Walter Bagehot, through the expressions and images that allude to the specificity of Spain, in political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. Finally, the conclusions and limitations of this study are discussed. The conclusions will attempt to highlight what has been maintained and what has disappeared in recent decades of this Spanish character that explains or helps to understand the current events analysed by the weekly.

3. Bagehot, *The Economist* and 'National Characters'

Walter Bagehot was one of the most outstanding British intellectuals of the 19th century. A banker, writer, economist, journalist and frustrated politician –although Gladstone considered him "the permanent Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer" – Bagehot has gone down in history as the author of works such as *Lombard Street* and *The English Constitution*, two classics in British economic theory and politics. He was responsible for, among others, such topical ideas as the role of central banks as lenders of last resort, or the invention in 1876 of Treasury Bills, a new type of short-term bond to finance the public spending of Disraeli's government (Grant, 2019).

Bagehot was also an attentive observer of international current affairs and was very curious about national peculiarities. Some of his best essays and articles –along with biographical ones– were reflections on the social and cultural idiosyncrasies that gave a better understanding of political and economic developments in different countries. The first of his

trips abroad, his stay in Paris in 1851, when he was only 25 years old, marked his destiny as an author, after the publication of his "Letters on the *Coup d'Etat*" in the *Inquirer*. His analysis of Napoleon III's coup d'état led him to put forward one of the constants of his thought thereafter: the idea that 'national character' is probably the most important factor in understanding the political and economic life of a country. This approach adopted by Bagehot, and inherited by the weekly, was the result of an attempt to scientifically understand social and political behaviour, the application to these fields of Darwin's theories of evolution, and the influence of the concept of 'national character' already used by authors such as Burke and Mill (Varouxakis, 1998; Hajdenko-Marshall, 2003). In fact, the union of these three perspectives would be reflected in his book *Physics and Politics or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of 'Natural Selection' and 'Inheritance' to Political Society* (1872), where he would speak of national character as 'the name for a set of more or less universal and stable habits of a country.' As he would write in "Béranger" (*National Review*, 1857), "national character is a deep thing; you cannot exhibit much of it to people who have a difficulty in understanding your language; you are in a strange society, and you feel that you will not really be understood" (Cited in Dudley Edwards, 1993, p. 144).

Several years after the Parisian experience, in 1868, Bagehot and his family spent two months in the French Pyrenees, and to round off their holiday they spent four days in Spain, more specifically in some towns in the Basque Country. Although it was a very brief stay, in a way it can be compared to that of 1851. It was not by chance that their visit to San Sebastián coincided with Queen Isabella II's stay in the city, just before her departure for Biarritz, due to the 1868 revolution, the so-called 'Glorious Revolution'. With the excuse of the news of the revolutionary process, Bagehot published in *The Spectator* "Four Days in Spain", a *costumbrist* essay with his impressions of Spain and the Spanish people. As in the French case, the author frames the political event –to which he hardly refers this time– in the context of a certain Spanish 'national character.'

On the one hand, Bagehot was captivated by the nature and the people of the place. The harmony of the landscape, the special brightness of the sun, the cheerfulness and friendliness of the people, and the beauty of the women ("you will see more attractive girls between Biarritz and San Sebastián than between Bordeaux and Paris") lead him to say that this corner of Spain would be the only place outside England where he would like to live. But at the same time, his account of other aspects of life in Spain –laced with British irony– is devastating. He paints a dirty, unkempt country ("if the revolution triumphs, the new government will do well to prioritise the supply of soap and water, and to make good drainage of the streets a fundamental article of the Constitution"); where something as basic as the running of a customs house is a shambles ("crossing the border takes you back two centuries in the civilisation of travel"), where civil servants are inefficient and corrupt, businessmen bad paymasters, and the administration stupid and lazy.

In the final paragraph of the article, making this connection between national peculiarities and the revolutionary conjuncture of the moment, Bagehot writes:

As I said, I have nothing to tell of this revolution. When I began to write I did not know that Queen Isabella had crossed the frontier. But of one thing I am certain: the disease of Spain is far too deep to be cured by a mere change of dynasty or form of government. You want a revolution in the executive habits of government. You want something which could touch the common social existence and daily habits of the people [...]. You have to make Spain a modern country with an effective executive; it is now an old-fashioned, with an ineffective executive [...]. When Spain possesses an administration in whose vigour and whose science Europe has equal confidence, Spanish revolutions will have achieved the task which, under vast encumbrance, they are now beginning.

Although “Four Days in Spain” was published in the weekly *Spectator*, under the initials W. B., it could well have appeared anonymously in *The Economist*, the publication that Bagehot had edited since 1861, and where he remained until his death in 1877. Indeed, the author of *Lombard Street* and *The English Constitution* has a place of honour, also in the history of journalism, as the most illustrious editor of the British economic weekly. And probably, by extension, as the figure who most contributed to shaping the editorial identity and unique profile of this publication, so influential today.

In the 19th century, *The Economist* strongly extolled the virtues of Victorian England and, taking some of them as a reference, sometimes severely criticised the national practices and characteristics of other peoples. Thus, a few years after the unification of the German states, it described the German people and their Teutonic pride as that of the *nouveaux riches*, “eager to persuade their neighbors that the wealth they had in fact hoarded by their own efforts was descended from a long line of noble ancestors” (“German Chauvinism,” *The Economist*, 21 August 1875, p. 988). Elsewhere, it was maintained that the French, “excitable by nature, uncontrolled and very sensitive to risk,” were not suited to live under a system of Parliamentary Government like the English –though flawed, the best– but in a system where the Government was a mere advisory body to a leader with power (“Why an English Liberal may Look without Disapproval on the Progress of Imperialism in France,” *The Economist*, 6 July 1874, p. 682). Nor had the Americans hit upon the key, and after the Civil War many of them were wrong to attempt to “give electoral rights to the ignorant, and often degraded, new class of emancipated negroes” (“The Democratic Cause in America”, *The Economist*, 3 October 1868, p. 1131).

The weekly's sympathy with the Latin way of being was no greater. Referring to the possible future of the Southern States in the Civil War, it pointed out that their fate was better guaranteed by Anglo-Saxon character and principles than by “Mexican and Spanish impulsiveness and imbecility” (“English Feeling towards America”, *The Economist*, 28 September 1861, p. 1066). With specific reference to Spain, which was extensively covered by *The Economist* between 1864 and 1876 on the occasion of the aforementioned revolution of 1868, the Carlist War, and the First Republic, the magazine noted: “Outside of one or two cities like Malaga or Cadiz, life in Spain goes on as it did in the sixteenth century; no class shows the slightest desire to improve its position, change its habits, or modify its ideas” (“Spain,” *The Economist*, 5 January 1867, p. 2). Elsewhere the weekly noted the Spaniards' extreme taste for rhetoric and bombastic phraseology, “something which might be worthy of comment in races superior to the Spanish; for instance, remarkably, in the inhabitants of New England” (“Religion in Spain,” *The Economist*, 8 May 1869, p. 527).

Later in the Victorian era, with other editors at the helm of the weekly, some of the stereotype's characteristic of Bagehot's time were maintained and updated. The Germans were “a colonising race”^{*}; the French, “though they have abandoned Catholicism, still retain many of their prejudices”^{*}; the Spanish, finally, lived in a ‘somewhat medieval’ society³. Of course, the stereotyping of national character traits into specific attributes and characteristics followed the tradition of thinking about ‘the others’ with the simplifications that help to shape simple images of distant and complex realities, a phenomenon that has always been of great interest from the point of view of the representation of national identities in the media (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Perry, 1985; Wanta *et al.*, 2004; Grix & Lacroix, 2006; Tzogopoulos, 2016; Ingenhoff & Segev, 2020).

In the particular case of Spain, many of the aforementioned national peculiarities continued to be highlighted throughout the twentieth century. The magazine repeatedly exposed the duality of a country admirable for the character of its people, its privileged natural conditions, etc., but at the same time incapable of advancing along the path of modernity and

* See Annex for the full references of the following footnotes.

progress due to the complexity of its political life, the weakness of its system of government, the lack of leaders and statesmen who were up to the task, and the inefficiency of the Administration. In 1910, in a generic review of the country's situation, it was stated:

A person who visits Spain will certainly obtain a much more helpful impression than one who merely reads about her; there is a solid worth in the people and a store of natural advantages which give the impression that it ought to be an easy task for a good Government to lead the people along the path of prosperity. And yet, there is a strong belief that Spain has been long decaying, and is continuing to decay [...]. Spain's problems seem to be due to the fact that many of her institutions do not fit the people, and unless her statesmen can restore harmony, it will be a long time before she regains anything like her old position in the world⁴.

The convulsive political life in the 1920s and 1930s, from the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera to the Civil War, did not leave much room for departing from current affairs, and at that time there were few texts with a *costumbrista* tone. In any case, the inability of Spaniards to establish a stable system of government continued to be emphasised, neither with the monarchy, nor with a dictatorship, nor with the republic. Thus, at the end of the Civil War, an editorial on the future of the country concluded:

For over a hundred years Spain has not been able to produce a solution of her ills. During the nineteenth century Spain was torn by incessant strife. There were no less than sixteen *pronunciamientos*, four changes of regime and two civil wars, followed in the present century by six *pronunciamientos*, three changes of regime and another civil war. Most of these upheavals affected only what might be described as the political and administrative superstructure of the Spanish State. Behind them profound developments were taking place, fostering the revival of non-Castilian nationalities –a cultural revival first, then a political movement. Tragic “invertebrate” Spain has produced no solution for herself. The solution may be to “vertebrate” Spain, to exchange artificial uniformity for organic unity⁵.
(Note: *pronunciamientos* are military rebellions or coups d'etat.)

As the Franco regime progressed, the peculiarities of Spanish life in the special political environment of the dictatorship were once again aired. Different articles highlighted the particular “way of being” of the Spaniards, “the pleasant and uncommon character of the people, singularly decent and endearing... still natural, and absurdly genuine”⁶.

From the 1960s onwards, with Spain's increasing openness towards the outside world, the reasons for referring to national peculiarities multiplied. Although the latter, as Bagehot would have liked, tended to merit a few comments in works not devoted to them, there were pieces in which their treatment was almost the sole object. With good humour and a dose of exaggeration typical of *costumbrismo*, the weekly, for example, wrote about the figure of the “sereno”⁷, about the “fiestas patronales”⁸, the Spanish passion for football⁹ or the “puentes festivos”¹⁰. References to the Spanish character were also common in topics such as the development of tourist areas –especially Mallorca– and in reporting on diplomatic issues and disputes¹¹. With works such as these, a coverage whose most common topics were the problem of Franco's succession, nationalism, and violence, both governmental and terrorist, was softened. On the other hand, it continued to cultivate the image of a peculiar, different Spain, halfway between the past and the future. The result was a mixture of information and opinion, seriousness and good humour, topicality and timelessness, very characteristic of *The Economist's* journalism.

In general, the weekly found it difficult to move away from certain stereotyped views of reality –especially when the range of subjects and places it covered was so remarkably wide. A well-known Spanish economist, Juan Velarde Fuentes, criticised the magazine's extensive report on Spain (“The New Spain. A Survey,” *The Economist*, 2 April 1977) in his *Libretillas* of 1977. Disappointed, he commented that the bulk of the work was made up of well-known information, falsehoods typical of a hasty handling of data, and gossip. Velarde Fuentes also

regretted that a letter he had sent to the weekly some years earlier –which had not been published– had not helped to avoid falling into past errors (Velarde Fuentes, 1978).

The magazine's famous *Surveys*, such as the one mentioned by Velarde Fuentes, are precisely the journalistic pieces in which the British publication, from time to time, reviews the situation of a country, trying to give that joint vision –political, economic, cultural, etc.– that helps readers to understand its identity and state of development.

4. *The Economist's Surveys on Spain*

The Economist began to publish special sections on the situation in different countries mainly from the mid-twentieth century onwards. From its beginnings, the weekly was keen to provide readers with an overview of the situation in specific national territories –it usually used articles with the title “The situation in...”¹²– but it did not opt for long, monographic reports until the 1930s. Thus, in 1938, the stable section “American Survey” was created, which was a way of giving a weekly review of current affairs in the United States. However, except for the special sections created to follow the evolution of the fronts during the first years of the Second World War¹³, and some isolated supplements (see, “Unit Trust Survey”, *The Economist*, 4 May 1940), there was not much space for other types of content than the usual sections.

It was only from 1945 onwards, albeit with great austerity –paper restrictions were severe– that it began again to publish a more regular supplement –the traditional banking supplement reappeared in October of that year. In 1947, the weekly published a double supplement on the economy of Franco's Spain, after almost a decade of dictatorship (“Economics of Franco's Spain. I. Privilege without Planning”, *The Economist*, 16 August 1947, pp. 283–284; “Economics of Franco's Spain. II. The Poverty of the People,” *The Economist*, 23 August 1947, pp. 326–327). In the early 1960s, after the implementation of the First Stabilisation Plan (1959), the weekly published “Spain Discovers Europe” (*The Economist*, 1 July 1961, pp. 63–60), an eight-page supplement highlighting the modernising efforts of the regime, especially in economic matters. At the same time, some of the usual clichés continued to be expressed: a country divided between its African and European soul, projecting a “moral and political remoteness” (p. 53), enjoying, in the midst of the dictatorship, its own particular bread and circuses (“cheap alcohol, *tapas*, soccer and bullfights” (p. 58), and with an economy “with a degree of waste, nepotism and inefficiency that would be intolerable in a country where the normal play of political forces functioned normally” (p. 59)).

The first proper Survey, with its modern characteristics (an in-depth review of the state of the country, with a high pagination and signed by a journalist from *The Economist*), came in 1972. Since then, the weekly has published nine *surveys* on Spain, several of them about special moments in our recent history (just before and just after the death of Francisco Franco; the year of Spain's entry into the European Union; a date as significant as 1992, due to the Olympics in Barcelona and the Universal Exhibition in Seville; and the year of the beginning of the 2008 crisis):

1. Robert Moss, “Between past and future. A survey of Spain,” *The Economist*, 19 February 1972 (S, 1972)¹⁴.
2. Ray Alan, “The new Spain. A survey,” *The Economist*, 7 April 1977 (S, 1977).
3. Tony Thomas, “Merrily, merrily shall I live now? A survey of Spain,” *The Economist*, 1 March 1986 (S, 1986).
4. Merrill Stevenson, “Who speaks for Spain? A Survey”, *The Economist*, 11 March 1989 (S, 1989).
5. Daniel Franklin, “After the Fiesta. A Survey of Spain,” *The Economist*, 25 April 1992 (S, 1992).
6. Stephen Hugh-Jones, “A country of many faces. A Survey of Spain,” *The Economist*, 25 November 2000 (S, 2000).

7. John Grimond, "The second transition. A survey of Spain," *The Economist*, 26 June 2004 (S, 2004).
8. Michael Reid, "The party's over. A special report on Spain," *The Economist*, 11 November 2008 (S, 2008).
9. Michael Reid, "The strain in Spain. A special report on Spain," *The Economist*, 28 July 2018 (S, 2018).

The analysis of the weekly's discourses on Spain in these extensive special reports allows us to connect the ideas that *The Economist* highlights in them with the elements of the Spanish 'national character' that it has reflected in its pages almost since its beginnings. These lines of force, ideas, evaluations and concepts –which in the tradition of communication studies connect with 'schemas,' frames and stereotypes that from Lipman (1922) to Scheufele (1999) have always interested researchers– have historically helped the very international readership of the magazine to forge "an image in his head" (Entman, 1991, p. 7) about the reality of our country.

5. Features of Spain's 'national character' in *The Economist's* Surveys

This section analyses the discourses of *The Economist* in its *surveys* on Spain in order to find repeated argumentative structures about this 'national character,' and to analyse the set of ideas, concepts, and categories through which this identity is presented (Hajer, 2006). To this end, based on an in-depth and critical reading of the supplements, a handful of 'storylines' have been identified, ideas that help to structure the discourse (Hajer, 2009), and which underlie the stories about Spain as the protagonist of the political, economic, social, etc. events that took place in the years analysed, between 1972 and 2018. To identify these 'storylines,' the authors conducted a thematic analysis on the dominant narratives by initially reading and rereading the supplements to identify potential themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methodology. The analysis process took place in six steps: data familiarisation, initial generation of ideas and codes, searching and identifying themes, reviewing themes, naming them, and final report production. Data were coded manually, and themes reviewed throughout the analysis process. At the same time, a fact sheet was prepared for each supplement including headlines and sub headlines, descriptions of images, graphs and tables, personalities mentioned in the article, Spanish expressions included in the article, and descriptions of character traits of Spain and Spanish people. The following six main themes on Spanish 'national character' emerged from the narrative and thematic analysis.

5.1. A country in transition

It is understandable, given the period covered in this section (1972–2018), that Spain's political transition has been a recurring theme in *The Economist's* reports (Francisco Franco is the only person mentioned in all the *Surveys*). But the idea of being a country under construction, beyond the episode of the post-Franco transition, is still alive in different ways in the weekly's image of the Spanish political landscape. The continuous reference to the historical phenomenon of the "pronunciamientos"¹⁵ (S, 1972; S, 1977; S, 1986) and the intrinsic instability of the political landscape, and the permanent reference to the tensions of Basque and Catalan nationalism ("La segunda transición," S, 2004; "The strain in Spain," S, 2018), or to the two Spains (S, 1977; S, 2008) are recurrent lines of force in the interpretation of the political system, always "more tentative and less consolidated" (S, 2004) than it seems.

But in a more profound way, this idea of transition is also repeated time and again when addressing the tension between tradition and modernity, very present in the magazine's commentaries on Spain practically from its beginnings. The 1972 supplement, "Between past and future," depicts the contrasting realities at different times between the city/coastal areas and the countryside (S, 1989), the traditional institutions (Monarchy and Church, above all) and modern Spanish cultural trend-setters (Almodóvar, Mariscal, Chillida, Calatrava) (S,

1989), as well as the image of a certain economic “parochialism” (windmills in La Mancha) and that of flashes of innovation in cutting-edge areas of development (wind and solar parks) (S, 2008). From other perspectives, the idea of transition is also connected to that of a complex identity, straddling different and sometimes very distant realities (“Spain is a country straddling three worlds: Mediterranean, Europe, America,” S, 2000). The peculiar Spanish identity is described as follows in the first of the supplements analysed: “One of the most surprising things about Spain, given the tourist invasion it has experienced, is how little its basic character has changed. Open to the outside world, Spain maintains its indifference to imported value systems and a curious internal xenophobia that has separated it psychologically from the countries to the north for much of its history” (S, 1972).

5.2. A diverse country

Geographical, climatological, etc., and human and cultural variety is a recurring theme in *The Economist's* view of Spain, and this rich diversity is also one of the reasons for the country's attractiveness, according to the weekly. In several supplements, this feature is referred to in different ways: “the appeal of the country's tremendous beauty of nature and diversity” (S, 1972); “Spain is a subcontinent, and Spaniards come in a great variety of sizes, shapes, and regional colours” (S, 1977); “Spain is all of Europe in one country” (S, 1986); “If Spain were not so varied and vital, it would be in danger of becoming boring” (S, 1992); “Spain: A country with many faces” (S, 2000). The most enriching aspects of this diversity are often highlighted, but again and again the tensions –especially political ones– that arise as a result of it are also brought to light.

For *The Economist*, the battle between the centre and the periphery is as old as Spain itself, and is experienced intensely as a confrontation between regional Chauvinism and Hispanic individualism (S, 1972). The problems generated around nationalism – above all Basque and Catalan nationalism – in the last half century are framed by the weekly as part of the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces that characterise such a diverse society (S, 2018), in which one is accustomed to “tension” (illustrated in S, 2008 with Goya's “Duelo a Garrotazos”). According to the magazine, “coffee for all” –an expression used in several of the reports (S, 1977; S, 2004; S, 2008)– does not work in a system in which the autonomous regions reproduce the logic of government of the “caciques” (S, 1977; S, 2008). And the country has yet to find the formula for balance: “Spain has found it almost impossible to find the right balance between unity and diversity. Historically, the pendulum has swung back and forth” (S, 2018).

5.3. A festive, hospitable and tolerant country

The sun, tourism, flamenco, fiestas... are part of many contextual references used by the weekly to help the *reader* better understand the Spanish national character. These references are mainly used on covers, headlines and photographs –reproducing the well-known and stereotyped collective imagination about Spain– when highlighting typically Spanish terms (‘paradores,’ ‘tapas,’ ‘siesta,’ ‘fiestas,’ ‘toros,’ ‘bares,’ ‘cafeterías,’ etc.), or when metaphors are used to reflect certain situations or phenomena: (“Cuando caliente el sol” (S, 1972), “The sun also sets” (S, 1977), “After the Fiesta” (S, 1992), “The party's over” (S, 2008)). More fundamentally, there is a continuous reference to a special lifestyle, in which quality of life and enjoyment are central elements. As Tony Thomas commented in the mid-1980s, “if you go to any park on a Sunday you realise that the country is fortunate in enjoying the things that really matter in life” (family, children, low class consciousness, etc.) (S, 1986).

On the one hand, the weekly connects this festive and enjoyable character, which is even reflected in the pace of life: “One of the mysteries of today's Spain is how people manage to live on so little sleep. Modernity has almost eliminated the *siesta*, but the rest has not changed,” S, 1992). At the same time, Spaniards are displaying accentuated individualism and materialism. In a year as important as 1992 (Olympics in Barcelona and Universal Exhibition

in Seville), *The Economist* spoke of the 3Cs of the new Spanish materialism: 'coche' (a car), 'compañera' (a girlfriend), and 'casa' (a house) (S, 1992); a few years earlier (S, 1989), the weekly had spoken of "a highly individualistic country, with little civic culture, rather little respect for the established..., and with a touch of anarchism."

On the other hand, and although it may seem paradoxical, it is a constant feature of the magazine –since Bagehot's time, as seen above– to connect this Spanish quality of life with the character of its people. Spaniards stand out for their cheerfulness, hospitality, tolerance..., for practising a 'humanity' that pleasantly surprises the foreign visitor: "Most Spaniards have a deep sense of human interdependence. No people are kinder and more solicitous towards foreigners" (S, 1977); "Spaniards are, of course, human beings like the rest of us –but they work harder to be so" (S, 1977); "Spaniards as individuals are always without exception kind and sympathetic" (S, 2008). On several occasions the magazine links Spanish hospitality and tolerance, for example when addressing the issue of immigration, with the historical multiculturalism experienced in the country since the Middle Ages.

5.4. *A country with an inefficient administration*

In general terms, the magazine takes a less than positive view of the performance of governments and the public sector. Sometimes the weekly refers directly to "the inefficiency of the administration" (S, 1977), to a "defective Welfare State" (S, 2018), or to the shortage of administrative talent, "always rickety in Spain" (S, 1986), something that, as seen in previous paragraphs, has been part of the Spanish 'national character' for the weekly since Bagehot's time. Bagehot's impressions of inefficient and corrupt civil servants, poorly paid businessmen, and a stupid and lazy administration are echoed here again, albeit in a much milder form, after his trip to our country.

The Economist also refers on several occasions to the weakness of civil society and the spirit of public service, both on the part of citizens and of civil servants and rulers ("Civil servants feel more like instruments of authority than servants of citizens" (S, 1977); "Apart from Hungary and Romania, no country has ever been so poorly served by its nobility" (S, 1986); "In Spain there is no dense civil society, but citizens who unite to challenge authority" (S, 1989)). According to the magazine, this leads to quite common behaviours such as corruption and fraud in politics, tax evasion, the slowness of the administration, or phenomena such as 'enchufados' (the plugged in), 'amiguismo' (cronyism), and the proliferation of 'sinvergüenzas' (scoundrels) in the public sphere (S, 2018). Likewise, this certain disdain for what belongs to everyone is exemplified by the magazine at different times with comments on the "lack of care that Spaniards have –for example in their tourist areas– with one of the country's fundamental assets: its wonderful natural beauty (S, 1986), or on the high degree of non-compliance with certain environmental regulations of the European Union ("Spain is the biggest non-complier with European green legislation," S, 1992).

In the last of the supplements reviewed (S, 2018), Michael Reid writes:

Spain needs more reforms. It suffers from mismatches in the skills and competences of the workforce, a flawed education system, a generation gap and an ageing population. Its public administration, at all levels, is flawed by cronyism and inefficiency.

5.5. *A country with a weak economy*

The magazine highlights at different times the vitality of the Spanish economy, with two 'economic miracles' such as that of the 1960s, and the one following its accession to the European Union, reflected above all in the 1990s. However, very often the weekly emphasises the enormous dependence of the Spanish economy on confidence, investment, and international conditions (S, 1972; S, 1989; S, 1992; S, 2000). Important sectors such as the automobile industry (completely in foreign hands) or tourism (dependent on foreign visitors) are shown to reflect this dependence on the outside world. Along with this lack of autonomy,

the weekly highlights the excessive prominence of two sectors in the economy: banking and savings banks ("In Spain, if you walk through the streets of the centre of the main cities, you get the impression that everyone who doesn't have a bank works in one of them," S, 1986) and construction ("If you want to make a quick buck in Spain, become a property developer," S, 1972). Both sectors often work hand in hand with regional and local governments ("ayuntamientos"), generating not few market dysfunctions, as well as other problems such as corruption (S, 2008).

The Economist speaks of a dependent economy with imbalances, which had to get rid of obsolete industries (shipyards, mining, etc.) (S, 1992) and which is still trying to promote new innovative sectors ("In search of a new economy," S, 2018) to compensate for its excessive fixation on the sun, bricks, and banks. The publication also highlights other problems that recur throughout this period (the rigidities of the labour market, in which trade unions play a major role (S, 1989), the black market economy (S, 2018), the problems of unemployment and productivity (S, 2004), etc.). For its part, two outstanding economic areas that reflect the country's modernisation are, according to *The Economist*, the extraordinary investment in infrastructure (S, 1992), and the growing internationalisation of Spanish companies such as Santander, BBVA, Telefónica, Ferrovial, Inditex, etc. (S, 2008). In the latter case, the contrast between the British weekly's judgements of Spanish companies over a period of just under two decades is illustrative: "It is still as difficult to name a Spanish multinational as it is to name a famous Icelandic company" (S, 1992); "Many Spanish companies are now well capitalised, have good technology and a cadre of internationally experienced managers" (S, 2008).

5.6. *A country of artists and little science*

More than half of the covers of the supplements analysed use images of Spanish art and culture (A painting by Goya (S, 1986), another by Picasso (S, 2000), a recreation of Miró's style (S, 1992), an image of the architecture of the City of Sciences and Arts in Valencia (S, 2004), and a 'ninot' (effigy) of the Fallas (S, 2008). Again and again the weekly highlights the artistic vitality of the country, its "cultural exuberance" (S, 2004), with abundant references to authors, painters, film directors, and architects from different periods: Lorca (S, 1972), Goya, Machado, Unamuno, Pilar Miró (S, 1977); Cervantes, Goya, Gaudí, Picasso (S, 1986); Dalí, Almodóvar, Pantoja, Jurado, Hombres G, Nuria Espert (S, 1989); Almodóvar, Mariscal, Gaudí (S, 1992); Chillida, Gaudí (2000); Almodóvar, Tamara Rojo, Elena Anaya, Calatrava (S, 2004); Goya, Plácido Domingo (2008); and Calatrava (S, 2018)). For *The Economist*, one of the areas that best reflects this artistic and cultural vitality is architecture, and reference is often made to the transformative power of the example of Bilbao with the Guggenheim Museum, but also to the work in many other cities of great national and international architects (e.g., Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Richard Rogers).

In contrast to this cultural excellence, the weekly presented Spain as a country lacking in aspects such as scientific development, research and education. Already in the first supplement (1972) it read: "Spaniards tend to get rather metaphysical when they talk about why the scientific tradition associated with names like Juan Huarte and Luis Vives, back in the 16th century, has vanished." Several years later, the weekly commented: "In 1986, only 1 in 500 Spaniards is a scientist; in the USA, 1 in 83" (S, 1986). Only a few years ago, the publication pointed out that "public spending on R&D is around 1.2% of GDP, half the average of the rich OECD countries" (S, 2018), something also highlighted in other supplements (S, 1989, S, 1992, S., 2008). The magazine has linked the structural deficit in R&D to problems and shortcomings in the education system, both at basic education levels (highlighting the problem of school failure (S, 2008)) and at higher levels ("Education in Spain is in a chaotic situation, especially at university level" (S, 1989)).

Particularly in recent years, *The Economist's* supplements have highlighted innovation and technological development efforts in areas such as recycling, aeronautics, biotechnology, etc. However, the magazine's evaluations of them end up confirming the vision of this substantial scientific deficit. For example, in 2008, when commenting on several innovative projects, the weekly magazine ends up emphasising that "Spain is not good at turning research into patents and products" (S, 2008). Something similar happens in the story about a highly innovative company such as ASTI Mobile Robotics: "As a research-intensive, high-tech company with global ambitions, fast-growing and led by a woman, ASTI is everything that Spanish companies traditionally are not" (S, 2018).

6. Conclusions and limitations

The image of a country conveyed by the international media is increasingly important in a globalised and interdependent world. Some of these media have a special role to play in this process, and the British weekly *The Economist* is certainly one of them. For more than a century and a half, the publication founded by James Wilson in 1843 has been a reference for politicians, opinion leaders and businessmen around the world. For this reason, it is of particular interest to understand the magazine's special way of contextualising news events in different latitudes from the perspective of each country's 'national character.'

The concept of 'national character,' coined in Britain in the 19th century, fits perfectly with the way *The Economist*, especially since the work of its most famous editor, Walter Bagehot, highlights the deep features of the way a country functions and behaves. Although the magazine has evolved remarkably since Bagehot's time, it is still common for many of its articles –especially the longer and more in-depth ones– to continue to interpret current affairs in the light of these very stable features (clichés, stereotypes, etc.), often anchored in history, culture and traditions.

This paper has analysed how *The Economist* applies this logic of reference to features of the 'national character' to analyse current affairs in Spain at different times, with special attention to the last half century. After analysing nine supplements on Spain published by the weekly between 1972 and 2018, we have highlighted six features that consistently and repeatedly configure the 'national character' of our country for the weekly. These six traits are: a country in transition; a diverse country; a festive, hospitable, and tolerant country; a country with an inefficient administration; a country with a weak economy; and an artistic and unscientific country. This article also shows how many of these traits, analysed in greater detail over the last half-century, were already present in the journal's work on Spain from the time of Bagehot.

"Spain is different, even from itself" (S, 1977), stated *The Economist* in the year of the first democratic elections after Franco's regime. Thirty years later, in the context of the 2008 economic crisis, the magazine was still talking about this different, peculiar country, reinforcing clichés and stereotypes that are deeply rooted in the image of Spain constructed internationally (Cano, 2010). A better understanding of these different features that, fairly or unfairly, the international media convey about a country is of great importance for better managing the country's international projection. Undoubtedly, the analysis of the peculiar way in which such an influential media outlet as *The Economist* configures Spain's 'national character' can contribute to this.

The findings of this article should be considered in the light of the following limitations. First, the flexibility that thematic analysis offers can be seen as a drawback of being not a very rigorous method, especially if it is conducted poorly (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Second, this study has limitations in terms of the type of newspaper articles analysed, as it focuses only on the most extensive and general articles on countries (supplements), so that future research could verify whether the characteristics of the Spanish 'national character' were present in the shorter, more topical news and analysis published by *The Economist*. Finally, a better

conceptualisation of the concept of 'national character,' as used and practised by Walter Bagehot, could help to better outline the attributes of national identity that have historically served the British weekly to address the peculiar 'character' of different countries.

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Annex

- ¹ "England and Germany," *The Economist*, 16-VIII-1884, p. 995.
- ² "England and France," *The Economist*, 4 October 1884, p. 1191.
- ³ "The Prospect in Spain," *The Economist*, 31-XII-1898, p. 1887.
- ⁴ "The general condition in Spain," *The Economist*, 5-II-1910, p. 275.
- ⁵ "The Future of Spain," *The Economist*, 10-II-1940, p. 248.
- ⁶ "The State of Spain," *The Economist*, 18-II-1956, p. 12.
- ⁷ "Keys of serenity," *The Economist*, 20-I-1968, p. 41.
- ⁸ "How Many Fiestas?," *The Economist*, 23-XII-1961, p. 51.
- ⁹ "Crisis in Spanish Football," *The Economist*, 18-III-1961, p. 52.
- ¹⁰ "Down with parties?," *The Economist*, 9-IX-1972, p. 45.
- ¹¹ "Goyesca," *The Economist*, 27-V-1961, p. 870; "Everyone's gone to Majorca," *The Economist*, 29-V-1971.
- ¹² See, among others, "The State of Spain," *The Economist*, 19-V-1873, pp. 462-463; "The Situation in Spain," *The Economist*, 2-VII-1881, pp. 819-820; "The Situation in Spain," *The Economist*, 28-XI-1885, pp. 1444-1445; "Spain," *The Economist*, 11-I-1890, pp. 35-36; "Spain," *The Economist*, 26-III-1898, p. 462; "The Prospect in Spain," *The Economist*, 8-IV-1899, p. 490; "The Old Spain and the New Spain," *The Economist*, 4-III-1911, pp. 429-430.
- ¹³ With the outbreak of hostilities, *The Economist* began publishing a weekly section entitled "Germany at War" at the end of 1939, which in 1941 became "German Europe." From March 1942, the emphasis would shift to coverage of military operations on the Russian front with the section "Russia at War."
- ¹⁴ In order to simplify the analysis of these documents, they will henceforth be identified with the S for Survey, and the corresponding year.
- ¹⁵ From this point on, Spanish words that are used in the Surveys to refer to typically Spanish phenomena, and which sometimes have a difficult equivalence in English terms (at least to capture the special meaning they have in our language), will be written in quotation marks.