

Joaquín Costa

By Eric Storm

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Costa, Joaquín

The intellectual Joaquín Costa (Monzón 1846 – Graus 1911) advocated profound social, economic and political reform. After the country's crushing defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898, he became the most influential *regeneracionista* modernizer. Although his efforts would bring no immediate change, his legacy would in the 1920s be appropriated by the military dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera, who presented himself as the “iron surgeon” needed, as Costa had argued, to regenerate the country.

Costa was the son of a poor farmer in the north of Aragón, and only at the age of seventeen decided to attend a secondary school in Huesca. A mason by trade, he worked on the construction of the Spanish pavilion at the 1867 International Exposition in Paris. The contrast between the international modernity he experienced in Paris and the poverty and backwardness he knew from home motivated him to continue his studies and dedicate the rest of his life to the modernization of his fatherland. Although eight years later he possessed a doctorate in both Law and Letters of the University of Madrid, he failed to secure an influential position, working as a journalist, teacher, public notary and lawyer, mostly in small provincial towns. With unflagging zeal, however, he published a large number of studies, reports and articles and took many initiatives to improve the country's socio-economic situation.

Early in his career, Costa became associated with Francisco Giner de los Rios' reformist *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*. Like Giner, he was highly influenced by the German idealist philosophy of Karl Christian Friedrich Krause. Rejected the economic *laissez faire* attitude of many of his progressive fellow intellectuals, he called for state-driven economic stimuli; thus, as early as 1880, he pleaded for a “hydraulic policy” – the construction of irrigation works, reservoirs and canals – in order to enhance the productivity of Spanish agriculture. In the context of the colonial “Scramble for Africa” that began in the 1880s, he also advocated an active role for Spain in the exploration and exploitation of the continent that was so close to its borders, founding among others the *Revista de Geografía Colonial* in 1885. With a

variety of initiatives, such as the foundation of new agricultural and colonial associations and the organization of large scale conferences, he tried to sway Spanish public opinion in support of his plans.

Another field of interest was the history of Spanish common law. Like the Germanist wing of the post-[Savigny](#) Historical School of Law in Germany, such as Otto von [Gierke](#), he saw the existing legal traditions as an expression of the Spanish popular will, deserving as such to be respected in the newly drafted Civil Code (finally adopted in 1889). He also wrote about Spanish history and published a major book – *Colectivismo agrario en España* (1898) – on traditional forms of collective land ownership.

Costa's activism was galvanized by the humiliating defeat of 1898, in which Spain lost its last main colonies after a short war with the United States. Costa attempted (unsuccessfully) to mobilize the productive forces of the country, first in a National Assembly of the Chambers of Commerce, then in a National League of Producers, in order to unseat the leading political parties, who according to him were responsible for the country's decrepitude and defeat. In 1901, he attempted to raise public opinion by sending his highly critical report on the political situation of the country (*Oligarquía y caciquismo como la forma actual de gobierno de España*, "Oligarchy and caciquism as the current form of government in Spain") to 171 prominent intellectuals and politicians. His hope that this indictment of clientelism and corruption would cause a Spanish version of the Dreyfus Affair was, again, disappointed; in his despair he called for a strong man, an "iron surgeon", who would prepare the Spanish population for true self-government. Although his actions did not have immediate effects, his criticisms gravely undermined the legitimacy of the existing constitutional monarchy; Costa eventually became the figurehead of a widespread clamour for political change and economic modernization, especially after his premature death in 1911.

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