

# In the Spanish labyrinth

THE SPANIARDS: A PORTRAIT OF THE NEW SPAIN

John Hooper

Viking £10.95

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Thirty million tourists visit Spain every year and most of them know nothing about the land beyond the horrendous ramparts formed by the hotels of the coast. For the few who pay even passing attention to the country's politics, it is unfortunate that the abiding image of Spain after Franco derives from the now classic newsreel of the Civil Guards who tried to hijack the entire Spanish political class in 1981. Colonel Tejero's wild scheme not only obscured the tranquil nature of the transition from dictatorship to democracy but also reaffirmed the popular view of Spain as a country of blood, violence and endemic civil war.

The turbulent nature of earlier Spanish politics was a reflection of a society in conflict, where millions went to bed hungry every night burning with resentment at the daily brutality of their lives. Peaceful political change after Franco reflected, by contrast, a wide consensus that it was time to bring politics into line with the dramatic social changes which had occurred despite the efforts of the dictatorship to stop the clock.

In recent years, there have been a number of accounts of that process but little worth reading on the transformation of Spanish society that made it both possible and necessary. For that reason alone, there would be a warm welcome for John Hooper's lively and informative survey of the economically

dynamic and industrialised Spain which emerged despite Franco.

However, this unputdownable book does more than just fill a gap. No foreign correspondent or visiting fireman can afford to be without such a knowledgeable account of such bafflingly complex and obscure subjects as Spain's recent experience in the fields of education, social welfare, housing, family structure, local regionalism, crime, the fashions and fads of youth, the press and the media. In nearly 20 years working on Spain, I cannot remember reading a more endlessly informative book.

There is no area of Spain, social or geographical, that Hooper does not illuminate. The effect of sexually liberated and wealthy tourists on a peasant society whose central values were thrift and puritanical morality is shown to be a dramatic increase in mental illness among local young men. The recent growth in Spain's modest crime rates is linked perceptively to the fact that immigrant children came of age at the same time as the recession hit Spanish industry. Sensitive treatment helps explain housing problems from the shanty towns on the outskirts of the new industrial towns to the overcrowded tower blocks which replaced them. Economic changes are related to the surge of sexual liberation in a country in which the penis was once referred to as "the diabolic serpent" and the virgin as "Satan's den" (see his article in last week's NEW SOCIETY).

Whether it be the horrors of bureaucracy, Spaniards' distrust of officialdom, the appallingly high number of man-made accidents, the Spanish music scene from classical to punk, dubbing in the cinema or food-poisoning in Spanish bars, Hooper invariably has telling comments to make.

There has always been good writing in England about Spain and John Hooper's book is in the best traditions of Ford, Brennan and Carr. Having lived in Spain for much of the time that Hooper is talking about, I can say that this is as true as well as an original book. With its boundless insights and densely packed information, it is the equivalent for the 1980s of Richard Ford's *Gatherings from Spain* and *Handbook for Spain* written in the 1840s. It is a must for anyone, academic, journalist or tourist, who wants to know what Spain is really like.