

Vicente PÉREZ MOREDA, David-Sven REHER and Antonio SANZ GIMENO (eds.), *La conquista de la salud: mortalidad y modernización en la España contemporánea*, Madrid, Marcial Pons Historia, 2015, 474 pp.

Between 1900 and today the population of Spain has increased by a factor of two – from just below 20 million to 46 million. The demographic transition accounted for this growth. Starting from a regime of high birth and death rates and slow population growth, from 1880 onwards the death rate began to fall, accelerating the population increase. Then mortality and population were stabilised in the first half of the twentieth century, when birth rates also fell, and the demographic transition was completed by 1960. This transition was fostered by dramatic improvements in health conditions. At the beginning of this period (1908), the average life expectancy of a new-born boy was 40.41 years and that of a new-born girl was 42.27 years, but by 2014 these figures had risen to 80.09 and 85.61 years respectively (<http://www.mortality.org/>). In *La conquista de la salud* (“The conquest of health”), Vicente Pérez Moreda, David-Sven Reher and Alberto Sanz Gimeno (with the collaboration of Diego Ramiro Fariñas in chapters 4 and 6) show how and why this achievement, which characterizes the modernization of Spanish society, took place.

This is undoubtedly a crucial question and the book makes an excellent contribution to the literature by means of providing a clear and much needed account of the complex causes and consequences of this change, even though the book suffers from certain limitations, which I will comment upon at the end of this review. The style of *The conquest of health* avoids complex statistical analysis and technicalities and, when needed, a comprehensive appendix clears up definitions and technical demographic terms. The book is aimed at both academics, including those who are not specialists in the subject, and ‘lay’ readers. Furthermore, it synthesises a large body of literature which will allow the expert reader to get more details if desired, without succumbing to the temptation of being too technical and, consequently, leaving out the general public.

The conquest of health is divided into eight chapters. It begins by looking at the nature and extent to which mortality rates declined in Spain across the twentieth century. The first substantive chapter (Chapter 2) uses a wide range of quantitative census data to account for the decline of mortality since 1860. The analysis is available by sex and cause of death and shows the reader the magnitude of the change which has led Spaniards to increase their life expectancy by nearly a factor of three between 1880 and to-

day, where about two thirds of the decline in mortality between 1880 and 1930 was due to the decline in infant mortality. Chapter 3 digs into the decline in mortality and explains why this occurred by classifying causes of death into 11 categories. It shows that in the late nineteenth century mortality was chiefly caused by a regime of infectious diseases (accounting for half of all deaths). In such pestilence, around 27% of the infants aged between one and five died of diarrhoea and enteritis, while respiratory diseases accounted for 16.7% of total infant deaths. Across the twentieth century this situation was reversed and by 1960 infectious diseases represented 17.6% of total deaths, diarrhoea and enteritis 1.6% and respiratory diseases 10%. Some of the reasons for these improvements included sanitary reforms, hygienic practices, the education of mothers, a drop in the number of siblings per family, and technological improvements. Chapter 4 explores in more detail the decline of infant mortality rates by cause of death.

Chapters 5 and 6 make a useful distinction between urban and rural mortality. By 1900 a person living in an urban area (the capital of a province) could expect to live 5-6 years less than those living in rural areas. However, across the twentieth century a reversal occurred: when urban centres began the fight against mortality, with public health movements, sanitary reforms and new investments in infrastructure, around the 1920s and 1930s, the urban penalty fell and living in a rural area was no longer a better option in terms of longevity. Readers might also find the authors' conclusion that the Franco regime had a positive impact in terms of the standards of health thought-provoking, and this despite the horrors of the post-war years and the subsequent autarchic policies of the dictatorship (this idea is also developed in chapters 4 and 7). In the 1940s, Franco's government began to implement a range of health programmes and public interventions to improve the health of infants and their mothers, and it seems that they were particularly effective given the high incidence on mortality and the low cost of treatment.

Chapters 7 and 8 are, perhaps, the less successful chapters. In Chapter 7, the authors link the decline in mortality to rapid rates of economic growth. There are several ways in which this chapter might have been taken further. One of the main lacunae in looking at the economy is that the use of GDP misses important dimensions of the standard of living that can be captured by real wages. Moreover, mortality rates might not be the best indicator of health to link to the performance of the economy. Mortality rates are an indirect measure of health, since they are assumed to be its opposite. Indeed, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The authors take a modest look at other health indicators such as heights. They summarise some of the findings by Martínez-Carrión and the height literature in Spain; however, they do not pay this literature the attention it probably deserves. Nor do they look at other indicators of health such as insurance statistics, which provide information on non-fatal illness. Chapter 7 is also too long (80 pages) and lacks direction with a concluding section. Chapter 8, while serving as the concluding chapter of the book, misses the opportunity to relate the decline of mortality in Spain to the broader European context. For instance, in the last few years, Fogel in the *Escape from hunger and premature death*; Floud, Fo-

gel, Harris and Hong in *The changing body*, and Angus Deaton in *The great escape* have accounted for the decline in mortality in the Western world, and this book misses the opportunity of establishing a meaningful and informative dialogue, albeit perhaps understandably brief, with this literature. One of the authors' conclusions on the decline in mortality regards the decline in the number of siblings per household (pp. 384-385). However, they miss the opportunity to establish connections with broader debates and hypotheses, such as the concept of *technophysio evolution* developed by Fogel and Costa in 1997.

Although this book might exhibit some of the above limitations by prioritising a clear account of the decline in mortality in Spain over a provincial or regional analysis, the book is a truly excellent and exciting contribution to the literature on the topic, in which it digests large historical datasets with a remarkably clear account of the decline in mortality over the last century by cause and sex. In recent years, few scholars have done so much to explain the health transition in Spain and even fewer have done so in such informative detail.

GREGORI GALOFRÉ-VILÀ
University of Oxford