

Llibert Tarragó

History and memory

*an interview with
Borja de Riquer*

Paul Ricoeur says of memory that it is defined “by the presence in the spirit of something from the past and by the search for such a presence”. We have been struck by the intensity of that presence and that search since the year 2000. What do you think of this very strong surge of memory?

I think that we have to make a clear distinction between memory and history. Spanish historians have been studying the many facets of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist repression that followed for many years. For example, everything that has to do with the courts martial, the people who were shot, the prisoners, the different forms of prohibition and repression, anti-Francoism... Unfortunately, the only people who know about these works are the experts who go to colloquies and congresses. This is a sensitive point I am touching on, and I would emphasise that public opinion, and especially the media, have so far taken little notice of all these historical studies.

At present we are witnessing a positive phenomenon. The new generation of young people in their twenties, mainly young historians, reckon that no-one has sufficiently pointed out the importance of these investigations, their significance, to society. Moreover, this feeling is largely shared by young people interested in history and politics. They think that many things from the past have been hidden from them, mainly about the Civil War and Francoism. It is a clear consequence of what I call “excessive silences”. Likewise there is a kind of divorce between what young historians in particular reckon should be done now and what the previous generation of historians did. An elementary problem arises: how to guarantee that the many pieces of work that have been done will be handed on?

It is not true that there has been a sort of oblivion, at least on the part of historians. If some people may have forgotten, it is the politicians, which places the problem on a different level.

The government waited until 2006, in the dead of night, to remove the equestrian statue of Franco in Madrid. The one in the enclave of Melilla, which was moved for works, has been put back. These two events raise the question of the state's memory policy.

It is true that there has not been an official democratic memory policy. In Spain over the last thirty years there have been many historical commemorations: in 1992 the discovery of the Americas; in 1998 the disastrous end of the colonial empire; in 2000 the birth of Charles V, which takes us back to 1500, but nothing closer.

For the historian it is interesting to analyse how the different anniversaries of the Civil War in 1936 and the installation of the Franco regime in 1939 have been commemorated. In 1976, when the Transition was in full swing, almost nobody talked about the Civil War. In 1979, when democracy was taking its first steps, no-one recalled the beginning of the Franco regime. The first initiative to mark those two events was in 1986, the second in 1989. They came from the university world and remained confined to it.

In favour of those two anniversaries, under a Socialist government, there were signs of a will to establish a certain comparison between the outbreak of the Civil War and the process of the Transition. At the same time, the work done by certain historians consisted in showing how the Republic in 1931 had done things badly and how the Transition was doing them well. In short, the point for them was to present the Republic as a collective failure and the Transition as a collective success. It was a simplistic vision which clearly had a political intention.

Ten years later, in 1996 and 1999, under the rightwing Partido Popular government, the comparison was made again, but in more radical terms. 'Revisionist' historians emerged, taking up the theses of the Francoist historians who attribute to the leftwing and nationalist groups of the 1930s the role of instigators of the Civil War.

In 2006 under the Socialist government the debate focused on the subject of the Republic. People wondered how to retrieve its values, to what extent they should be promoted, how to take an experience from the 1930s and integrate it into the present. Those issues have sharply divided opinion. The conservative sectors regard the Republic as a total failure and invite everyone to forget it, while the more progressive sectors consider that the present democratic system in Spain is based on values which are very close to the Republican experience.

Apart from that, it is obvious that the symbolic presence of Francoism is still very strong. We have studies done by historians about that persistence. It is quite surprising. Statues, squares, streets still bear names inherited directly from the Franco regime, and that presence is visible in small villages and regional capitals, where you can still read the names of Franco, José Antonio Primo de Rivera and General Mola. That is why the debate between Francoist symbolism and Republican democratic memory has also become a political debate.

Your historian colleague Manel Risques told me recently: “The democratic Transition and democracy have administered oblivion. If the Republic of 1931 and the anti-Franco struggle are not integrated into the recovery of the historic memory, it cannot stick”.

That thought very much follows on from what I have just said. Those who do not want us to talk about those two events are following the same line of thought as the Francoists in 1939: to forget the experience of a democratic regime, admittedly marked by a host of contradictions and problems, but which was a response to the will of the people.

The people on the right, that is, those who have neither a democratic past nor a democratic tradition, are the ones most interested in seeing that neither the Republican memory nor the memory of the anti-Franco struggle are recovered. Indeed, to do so would be to expose the fact that historically the Spanish right wing has never been democratic. What is more, the right wing today is formed by the heirs of political and sociological Francoism. Being reminded of that does not suit them at all.

That does not mean that we need to make an apology for the Republic, but it would be politically unfair and historically false to claim that the whole democratic struggle against the Franco regime, which sprang to a large extent from the Republican tradition of the 1930s, has nothing to do with the democracy we have today.

Another colleague of yours says:
“The victory of Francoism is silence”.

In 1939 the Francoists set out to do away with all the historical and social traditions which had made the Republican regime possible. They presented them as defeated and dangerous ideologies. In fact, liberal democratic thought, working class thought,

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nationalist thought, free thinking, all that was ousted and replaced by an ideological arsenal based on traditionalism, ultracatholicism, anti-liberalism and conservatism operating as a hierarchy. Suddenly democracy had to redouble its efforts to bring to light the values inherited from different kinds of democracy.

Let me tell you about some ideas put forward by the writer Martí Rosselló: “Amnesia was agreed at the moment of the democratic transition. Thinking to avoid greater evils, we mortgaged our future. After Franco died we thought about that future! But after the attempted military coup on 23rd February 1981 we agreed to renounce it. For young people the Civil War is prehistory and Franco is the Catholic Monarchs”. How is that period of history taught?

When you read school text books you notice that the Civil War and the Franco regime are mentioned clearly and relatively correctly. The problem does not arise from the school text books or what history teachers say, because they talk about it a good deal and very well. In secondary schools we can see that the free projects chosen by the pupils mostly concern the Civil War and the Franco regime, Republican exile, the deportation of Republicans to the Nazi camps. Inside the school, then, there is a clear interest in these issues and it is satisfied. The problem is to be found outside the school. Newspapers, magazines and television need to recall these events in a relevant way. They do so, but quite differently according to the part of the country. Catalan television has been a pioneer in dealing with these issues. It has done so with programmes of fairly good quality based on documentaries, eyewitness accounts, historical reconstruction debates. On the other hand, Spanish television has given them a weak, sometimes frivolous treatment, regarding History as a simple series of events, as if they were talking about some faraway country, as if they were issues that had not affected this country.

That changed somewhat in 2006, but only a little.

How do you see the question of impunity in a society where one of the most widespread expressions in the political vocabulary is “no winners or losers”?

That phrase is not appropriate. Francoism meant that there were losers for forty years. During the political process of the Transition, the amnesty law placed the victims on the same level as the executioners. The anti-Francoists were given an amnesty, but so were the military, the police and the civil servants of the regime who had tortured, killed or sent them to prison. Historically and ethically that was unfair. Another matter is that politically we may see that as convenient or necessary. All that explains this feeling of the moral and political impunity of the Francoists and their regime.

Francoism, fascism, what link can you make between those terms?

We can say that Francoism is Spanish fascism with particular characteristics, different from other forms of fascism. Let us consider first that the Civil War brought about a total break in Spanish society, which made it difficult for the discourse of national unity which fascism has always preached to sink in. Moreover, the Falange was a very small party which did not take power as in Germany and Italy. Power was built up by the military, with Franco at the head, and he used the small fascist party according to his

own interests. Likewise, the state and the government subordinated the party. That is the opposite of what happened in Germany and Italy. Franco's power was infinitely greater than Mussolini's. Institutionally, Franco could not be dismissed by the party, whereas Mussolini could, and indeed was. So Franco's personal and military power was always far superior to the power of the Falange. The dictatorial regime that was prepared during the Civil War and constructed over its forty years of existence had Franco as its sole, central figure. Until 1945 he defined himself as a fascist. Then, when the situation in Europe changed, he played down the fascist ideological aspects while changing nothing of the content. Francoism used the characteristic elements of fascism according to the moment. That explains why it lasted so long.

Marc Bloch has written: “Behind the tangible features of the landscape, the tools or the machines, behind the writings that appear the iciest and the institutions that appear the most completely detached from the people who established them, it is men that history tries to grasp. Anyone who does not manage to do so will only ever be, at best, a tactician of learning. A good historian is like the ogre of legend. When he scents human flesh, he knows his game is there”. Do you have an example of that “scent of human flesh”?

I reckon that personal, individual experiences are extremely useful when we are doing history with pupils and the general public. They serve to bring historical problems to life and allow us to explain specifically what the Franco regime was, for example.

For me, an example of the “human flesh” Marc Bloch talks about is Eulàlia Berenguer, whose case we recalled on Catalan television as part of the series “Deadly Sins”, recollecting everyday life under Franco. Eulàlia was fifteen when the Civil War broke out in 1936. She joined the Young Communists, the JSU, carried out missions to assist the republican soldiers; in 1939 she went into exile with her father, who was a peasant and not very politicised, with her brothers and sisters, she discovered the French concentration camps. Then she was expelled by the French authorities, sent back by train from Hendaye to Barcelona. The journey took four days with nothing to eat, nothing to drink, treated like an animal just like the Jews setting off for the camps, she was sent to jail and, although no specific crime could be proved against her, she stayed locked up until 1943.

For those three years, the mayor of her village, Sant Feliu de Codines near Barcelona, did everything possible to have her sentenced and kept in jail.

Nevertheless she was released, but she was forced to return to Sant Feliu. There she was sent to Coventry by the Falangists and the town hall, people were forbidden to speak to her, they made her life impossible until the corporal of the Guardia Civil intervened and forced the fascists to leave her alone. That woman, who lived in isolation for a very long time, ended up marrying the leader of the libertarian youth movement who was being given the same treatment. For a communist and a libertarian to come together in that way to fight the fascists seems to me to cock a lovely snook at agreed History! Eulàlia resumed her political

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event. The documents dealing with this affair exist, notably the mayor's injunctions at the behest of the authorities of the time, but the descendants of the people involved in that harassment do all they can to prevent anything getting out.

That is a beautiful lesson. A humble woman, an outcast, a symbol of the "Red Evil", with democracy she became a woman chosen by her fellow citizens to represent them.

The return to Catalonia of the public and private Catalan archives collected in Salamanca after Franco's troops had regarded them as spoils of war took place in 2006. It was an event, but it fired a debate which made us realise that memory was still raw and deeply political. Do you consider that event as essentially symbolic?

The return of the archives goes beyond symbolism. It is an act of democratic and historical justice. The looting in 1939 was done for political reasons. It is natural for the archives to return to their owners: government, parties, trade unions, associations, private individuals.

They were spoils of war. A principle of UNESCO establishes the return of stolen archives. The committee of experts who declared in favour of the return of the "Salamanca papers" was also chaired by Federico Mayor Zaragoza, former director general of UNESCO. The Zapatero government understood that it was a political matter: an affair with a political origin needs a political solution.

Moreover, the archivistic argument used against the return, to wit the breaking up of the unity of the Spanish Civil War archives, does not hold water. The principle of the thematic archive does not exist anywhere. In France there are no First World War archives, for example. It should also be known that these Catalan archives were kept in total disorder in a depot, mixed up with archives from the 19th century. The Partido Popular made it an issue of local pride in Salamanca and something for the right to get their teeth into.

To compare, imagine that the Germans had seized official archives and private documents when they arrived in Marseille in 1942 and transferred them to Besançon! Well, the people of Marseille would have claimed their dues. This affair is quite simple, even if it has been difficult for the Catalans to achieve their ends.

Let us change period. The Middle Ages, in short those were the "golden days" of Catalonia. But how has that celebration managed to cross time and make itself felt so strongly in these modern times?

In the Middle Ages there were Catalan institutions, a mediaeval parliamentary system similar to those of England and the Netherlands. They lasted until 1714. Then they

activity within the PSUC, the Catalan communist party, she was even arrested in 1974 and sent back to jail. In the first democratic elections she was elected first deputy mayor and then became mayor of her village at the head of a list composed mostly of women, which is an exceptional

disappeared and a centralised Spanish system was imposed. The Bourbon dynasty installed a system dominated by the military: the Captain General, always Spanish, became the leading authority in Catalonia. And that was the end of the Catalan nation. That defeat has stayed in the collective memory in the same way as the defeat in 1870 in France. That event feeds the imagination for ever because a trauma of that magnitude is unforgettable. That is normal.

Regarding 11th September 1714, the date of the “great defeat” of Catalonia, and paradoxically the day of the national holiday, a large part of Barcelona was razed to the ground. The remains have reappeared in the course of public works and the Catalans have decided to make a place of memory in the heart of their capital...

From now on the ruins of the Born district will be an important place of political memory, but also of the social memory of the 18th century. They will enable us to see how a city of that time was constituted. We know the names of the streets, the squares, the inhabitants, the trades house by house thanks to the archives. And so we can reconstruct a life space dating from the 18th century.

On that 11th September, a quarter of the city was destroyed by Philip V's troops. Twenty-five thousand people were made homeless, they had to leave the city. There were also thousands of deaths. Those remarkable ruins will help to raise awareness of the violence of the punishment and the political dimension of our 11th September.

If we consider the memories we have talked about, they are essentially “painful memories”.

Not all the memories we have are painful. The memory of 1931, the time of the Republic, is the memory of a great popular festival, the result of the will of the majority. At this time we are analysing, comparing the different statutes of autonomy of Catalonia: 1932, 1979 and 2006. It is very interesting from a historical point of view because it allows us to study the behaviour of the leaders and the people, in different contexts, faced with a single question: how does Catalonia want to organise itself and what kind of relations does it want to have with Spain? II

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