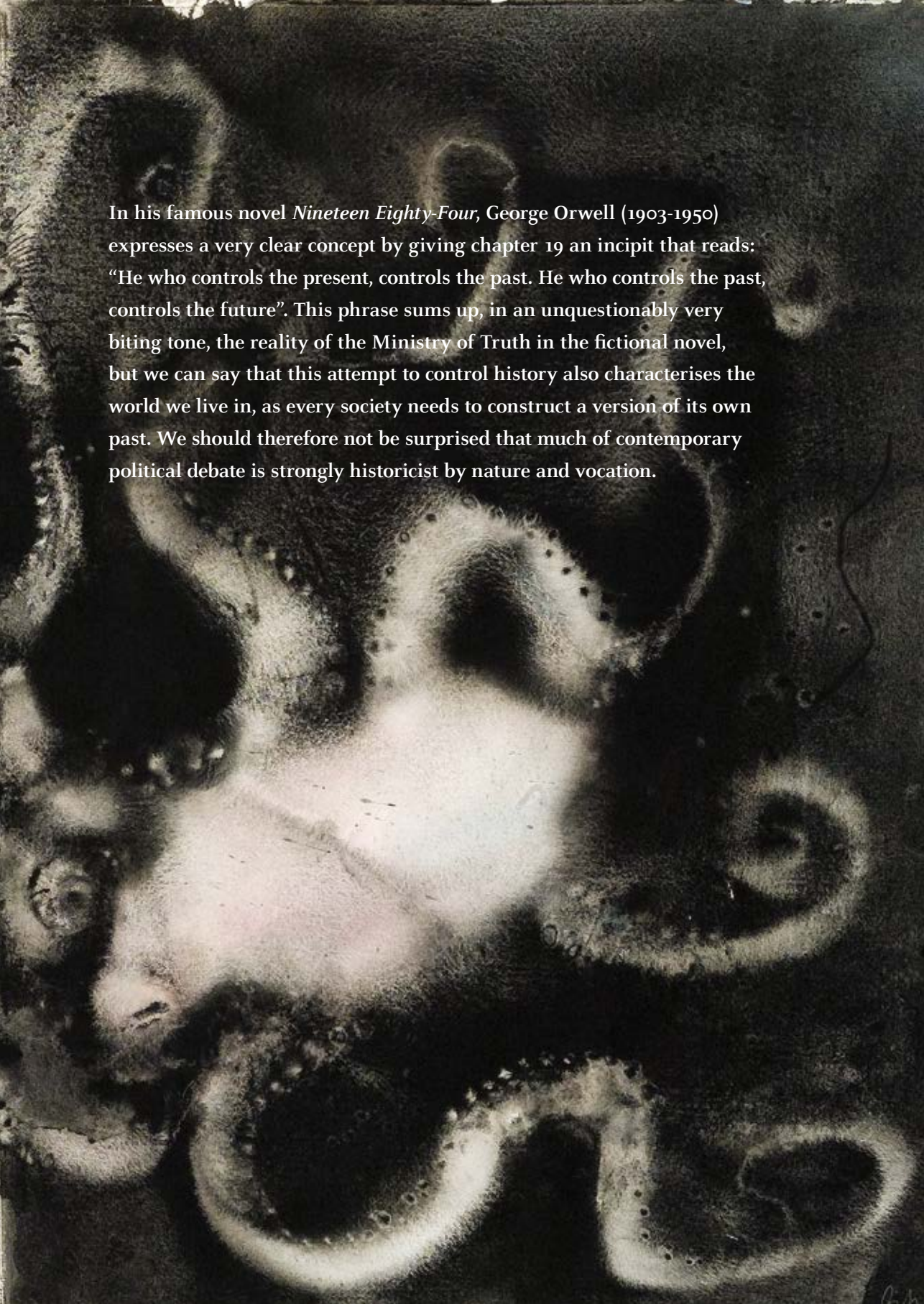


Giovanni C. Cattini

Historical revisionism

*The reinterpretation of
history in contemporary
political debate*

A dark, high-contrast, grainy image of a bear's face, serving as a background for the text. The bear's features are partially obscured by deep shadows and bright highlights, creating a somber and intense atmosphere. The texture of the fur is visible, and the overall tone is monochromatic with shades of black, grey, and white.

In his famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell (1903-1950) expresses a very clear concept by giving chapter 19 an incipit that reads: "He who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future". This phrase sums up, in an unquestionably very biting tone, the reality of the Ministry of Truth in the fictional novel, but we can say that this attempt to control history also characterises the world we live in, as every society needs to construct a version of its own past. We should therefore not be surprised that much of contemporary political debate is strongly historicist by nature and vocation.

REVISIONISM AND THE QUEST FOR HEGEMONY IN POLITICAL RHETORIC

When we speak of historical revisionism we have to tread very carefully, as the academic world is one thing and the use that, at times, the falsification and the openly party political use of the past can take on in the political debate is another. In fact the word “revisionist” became fashionable at the end of the 19th century as an insult used by Lenin (1870-1924), when calling the socialist reformer Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) a traitor. He had distanced himself from the master Karl Marx (1818-1883) by considering changing Marxist theory in the light of the latest tendencies in Western capitalist society, and thus theorising about the usefulness of the reformist path over the revolutionary, whose high point came after 1917.

On the other hand, today we take to be revisionist all the interpretations that, whether coming from university chairs or cultural pundits, try to dismantle the “truths”, at times mythologised, of traditional historiography. Even so, it should be said that in the universities all the historical views that try to question some of the crucial developments in modern and contemporary history are also understood as revisionism —from the French Revolution (1789-1799) to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), from communism to fascism and Nazism, and even the Holocaust— with the idea of reinterpreting certain historical events in the light of new facts, elements, and from a scientifically neutral perspective. According to the guidelines codified by Marc Bloch (1886-1944) —the French historian who founded the *Annales* school and who was shot by the Nazis— in his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, the historian's job is characterised by the quest for multiple and diverse sources in order to achieve a broader view with respect to traditional political history. Bloch also argues that the professional historian's duty is to understand the past and not to judge it, making clear the importance of cooling ideological or political dogmatism. In this way, then, revisionism acquires a neutral valence and can even be considered a fundamental element that should define the deontological ethics of the historian.

Despite all this, in common parlance, the word revisionism takes on a pejorative meaning because it is associated with a vulgar use of certain historical events manipulated for political ends and with a complete lack of scientific foundation. The political battle for the present —as we mentioned above when speaking of Orwell's immortal book— has to do precisely with the fact that very often the ideological and political debate presents a distorted view of past events —boundaries between the worlds of historians and politicians that have more in common with one another than it seems.

TWO GREAT REVISIONIST BATTLES FOR CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

In the last forty years, European historiography has experienced moments of real debate on key issues in our contemporary history. In the middle of the 1970s a very violent reaction developed in Italy to the claims by the historian Renzo De Felice (1929-1996)

Image on previous page:

Doble Coloidea 3 (Double coleoidea 3), Miquel Barceló (2008)

Mixed media on paper, 102,5 x 152 cm

in an interview with the American historian Michael Ledeen (1941) published in the book *Intervista sul fascismo*¹ (Rome 1975). At that time, De Felice had already partially published several volumes of the monumental biography of Benito Mussolini (1883-1945). But whereas in the academic work he had not made very cutting judgements, in the interview he clearly highlighted certain aspects of fascism that enraged his fellow historians, like, for example, considering the ideology of Mussolini as revolutionary in contrast to the reactionary ideas of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) or speaking of a true phase of consensus for the masses' role of active adherence to the regime from 1930 to the beginning of 1943, when Italy's fate in the Second World War (1939-1945) was irreversibly sealed.

The harsh ideological debate of the 1970s led a significant number of Italian historians to accuse De Felice of writing works characterised by "afascism", by the absence of an explicit condemnation of Mussolini's dictatorship, thus paving the way for a rehabilitation of fascism. These historians' attitudes represent an impediment to the development of the research work, as they merely fossilise an allegedly normative view of the past.

Another emblematic case of historical revisionism is the German. On June 6th 1986, an article by the historian Ernst Nolte (1923) appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* entitled "The Past That Does Not Wish to be Forgotten"². For this German historian, Nazi Germany has to be understood from the perspective of a response to the Asian barbarity of the Bolsheviks, who, in the 1920s and 30s, wrote a story of deportations, mass shootings, concentration camps, the wiping out of all alleged enemies, the extermination of millions of people who were innocent yet considered enemies. According to Nolte, it was all written before Hitler came to power, except for the gas chambers. The rhetorical question the German historian asks is: "[...] could the national socialists have carried out an 'Asian' action because they considered themselves and their people as potential or effective victims of an Asian action? Was not the Gulag Archipelago prior to Auschwitz? Was not the Bolsheviks' 'class extermination' the logical and factual past of the national socialists' 'racial extermination'?"

There then began a *Historikerstreit* (a dispute among historians) in which, among others, Jürgen Habermas (1929) stood out for his denunciation of the part of German history writing that plays down the Nazis' crimes and which does not openly and expressly denounce the Germans' national socialist past. It was in this context of ideological and political concerns that, the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Habermas himself considered the problem of the German national identity and of the importance of reappraising the links of identity in order to keep at bay the temptations that might revive the idea of a *Gross Deutschland*. He therefore formulated the theory of constitutional patriotism as an identity paradigm of German society. The renowned intellectual starts from the need to consider the difficult rehabilitation in the cultural patrimony and the national awareness of the philosophers Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) and the jurist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), all committed to National Socialism. With the country divided, after 1945 the cultural homogeneity of the Germans

■ ¹ LEDEEN, M., *Intervista sul fascismo*, Rome 1975.

² NOLTE, E., "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 6th 1986.

“Revisionism” is commonly associated with the manipulation of certain historical events for political ends

became dissociated from the form of organisation represented by state unity. Therefore and in the new post-1989 context, Habermas upheld that the new sense of belonging to the nation-state has to be projected in a dimension, identified with political order and constitutional principles, which results in a new form of constitutional patriotism. This identity corresponds to the loss of importance of the modern

nation state in some of its chief characteristics that have been the result of a long historical process. There's no harm in remembering that the Spanish adaptation of the concept of constitutional patriotism goes precisely in a direction that betrays the ideas of the German intellectual, based on the need to remember the mistakes and horrors of Germany's Nazi past. Conversely, the discourse that developed during the two terms in office of José María Aznar (1953), especially the second one, was based on presentist needs to limit the State as organised on a basis of autonomous communities and emphasise the unity of Spain, as the Constitution of 1978 does. It is therefore important to consider the historical, political and cultural context in which the Partido Popular's (PP) two terms in office took place, for they encouraged an important series of essays and studies that were revisionist in every sense.

NEO-ESPANYOLISTA REVISIONISM AND CONSTITUTIONAL PATRIOTISM

As I have just pointed out, in 1996, when Aznar came to power, there began in the Spanish State a wave of historical revisionism that reached its high point with the PP's overall majority in 2000, which heightened the staunch defence of Spanish unity through the new Aznarist creed of “constitutional patriotism”. Prior to October 1997, the tendencies of the PP government to make everything uniform were in a state of gestation. That was when Esperanza Aguirre (1952), the then minister of Culture, presented a project for the reform of compulsory secondary education (ESO) that resulted in the presentation of a royal decree in the Spanish parliament, on December 16th 1997, known as the *Plan to Improve the Teaching of Humanities in the Spanish Education System*³. Aguirre's objective was to establish some minimum contents, common to the entire State, in language, literature, geography and history in ESO, thus creating a shared model of “national curriculum”. These proposals were considered an encroachment on their authority by the governments of Catalonia, the Basque Country, Andalusia and the Canary Islands, and they came up against the full-frontal opposition of the Catalan, Basque, Canary Island and Galician nationalist and pro-independence parties and the PSOE itself. This bill was rejected by the lower house, one of the Aznar government's most difficult moments.

The will to promote a homogenisation of the history of Spain in a unitarist sense was touched on a couple of years later in a report by the Royal Academy of History⁴, produced in a new political and cultural context characterised by the PP's overall majority achieved in 2000. The impact of the rise of the PP was also felt in Catalonia, where from 1999 it gave parliamentary support to the CiU government of the Generalitat. This last

CiU government with external support from the PP forced the coalition led by Jordi Pujol (1930) to support the PP at State level, despite the fact that it was not necessary, as there was an overall majority. We have to remember that this new phase of the Aznar government was characterised by an accentuation of authoritarianism, by the lack of dialogue and contempt for the opposition, and by a warmongering attitude. The high points of Aznar's warmongering were the *reconquista* of the small islet of Perejil (July 2002) and the active support for the occupation of Iraq by the forces led by the USA, from March 2003. This policy of alliances eventually became one of the causes for CiU's defeat in the Catalan parliamentary election of November 2003.

From the historiographical point of view, the report by the Royal Academy of History denounces important distortions of Spanish history in the textbooks for secondary school students in various autonomous communities, such as the Basque Country, Navarre, Galicia and Catalonia. This document was published at the end of June 2000 and was immediately taken on board by the PP establishment, and especially by Aguirre, then president of the Senate, who warned in a threatening manner that "the current legislation establishes the obligation of the central State to determine the minimum common syllabus that has to be taught in any school or college in Spain". Moreover, the ex-minister remembered that she had denounced it two years earlier, and had stressed at that time "the problem of localisms, of the non-existence of the common themes that all Spanish people have to learn, just as many things that we learn with the Europeans or with students from all over the world are common".

This controversy was accompanied by a series of works characterised by the study of Spanish identity and nationalism by renowned academics who, like Javier Tusell (1945-2005), Carlos Serrano (1934-2001), Juan Pablo Fusi (1945) or José Álvarez Junco (1942), among others, also reflected on the limits of the creation of the modern Spanish State and its nationalising weakness throughout the 19th century.

Furthermore, this controversy encouraged some works whose aim was to contrast the supposed inventions of the "peripheral nationalisms" with a clear intent to preach unity. Among the many works were the lectures collected in *Spain as a Nation*⁵ by the Royal Academy of History, for the purpose of rebutting the views on the history of the Spanish State produced especially in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia, as, according to José Alcalá-Zamora y Queipo de Llano (1939), for the people who came up with them, "the provincial boundaries establish dark bottomless depths behind which there is nothing but emptiness".

In this cultural context of historical revisionism designed to clean up the image of centralist Spanish nationalism, the 14th Congress of the PP was held at the end of October 2001. The theme of a session was "Constitutional Patriotism in the 21st Century", to be presented by Josep Piqué (1955), then minister of Foreign Affairs, and María San

■ ³ *Plan de Mejora de la Enseñanza de las Humanidades en el Sistema Educativo Español*, Congreso de los Diputados, December 16th 1997.

⁴ REAL ACADEMIA DE LA HISTORIA, *Informe sobre los textos y cursos de Historia en los centros de Enseñanza Media*, Madrid 2000.

⁵ REAL ACADEMIA DE LA HISTORIA, *España como nación*, Planeta, Barcelona 2000.

Gil (1965), at that time president of the PP in the Basque Country. The core tenet was that the Constitution of 1978 ought to be the limit of the process of autonomy that had gone too far during the 1990s, thanks to the slender majorities of the PSOE, first, and the PP afterwards; they had had to make concessions to the demands of the autonomous parties, chiefly CiU. In this respect, the PP credo sees the Constitution as the result of a process for which the Spanish state is “a political nation forged from a long historical process”, with an identity “not ethnic but political, historical and cultural”. In the same vein, the theme points out that Spain is an “objective reality” as opposed to the “virtual identity of that which no longer exists or which has never existed”, typical of the peripheral nationalisms. For this reason, all non-Spanish nationalism is branded “exclusive” and accused of emphasizing difference and placing identity before freedom.

THE REVISIONIST DEBATE ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR, THE SECOND REPUBLIC AND THE PERIPHERAL NATIONALISMS

This view of constitutional patriotism was immediately embraced by the major media groups close to the PP government and the public media that adopted the concept of constitutional patriotism as a talisman to be used against the Basque and Catalan nationalist and independence movements. Conversely, these media organs never split hairs over the past “shared” by all the inhabitants of the Spanish State and the rights of the different nations within the State that were abolished and violated during the almost 40 years of Franco’s dictatorship. This battle for cultural hegemony over the discourse of the future of the Spanish State also arose at a time of profound revision of one of the most complex periods in the history of the State and which began precisely in 1996 with the 60th anniversary of the Civil War. In those years, a series of pseudo-history books began to be published, clearly aimed at rewriting the past with ideas at times verging on the neo-Francoist. This series brought publishing success for authors like Pío Moa (1948), César Vidal (1958), Federico Jiménez Losantos (1955), José María Marco, César Alonso de los Ríos (1936) and many more.

These authors’ interpretation of Spain and Catalonia’s past is aimed at discrediting the Republic and Catalanism and Basque nationalism as the chief factors responsible for the instability of the 1930s. In this context, as Justo Serna has explained, Francoism is not championed directly but as an apology for the lesser evil: in the name of democracy and liberalism the dictatorship is justified by considering that it halted communist barbarity. The revisionists consider that the republican ideas were about to throw open the gates to pro-Bolshevik totalitarianism, whereby the Francoists saved the Spanish State from tragedy with the Civil War. Likewise, Francoism is presented as the period that brought the stability thanks to which the economic leap forward could be made in the Spanish State in the 1960s. It also allowed the foundations of a welfare state to be laid. In this respect the poverty and wretchedness prior to the economic development during the dictatorship are explained away by the upheavals of the Republic and the Civil War. Moreover, these revisionist texts gloss over the Francoist autarkic policy and the poverty it brought, just as they forget to point out the importance of Western economic growth at the time when explaining the years of “desarrollismo”, which they attribute to the supposedly correct policies of Francisco Franco (1892-1975).

Of all these writers, the most prolific from the “historiographical” point of view is without doubt Pío Moa, who is also noted for the massive sales of his books, something explained by the support given by the media groups closest to the PP. His view of the past is notable for its presentism, for the constant anachronisms and, especially, for its hostility towards the Basque and Catalan nationalist and independence movements. Thus, his output goes from the analysis of the Civil War to the role of the nationalist and pro-independence movements as the cause of all the evils of the contemporary Spanish State. It should be pointed out that, in his bestseller *The Origins of the Spanish Civil War*⁶, Moa mentions that the PSOE and Esquerra

Republicana de Catalunya (Catalan Republican Left, ERC) were the parties responsible for the confrontation that brought down the Republic. Five years later he made it even more explicit with *1934, the Civil War Begins: the PSOE and Esquerra Start the Conflict*⁷, thus repeating the same accusation that the Francoist authorities made to all their supposed enemies during the long post-war period, in the purging processes. For sure, in *A Shocking History. Catalan and Basque Nationalism in Contemporary Spanish History*⁸, Moa increases his slurs against the Catalan and Basque nationalist and independence movements, making them responsible for all the evils of the Spanish State: “just like the revolutionary movements and often in alliance with them, [the Catalan and Basque nationalist and pro-independence movements] torpedoed freedom and democracy in Spain, and therefore paved the way for the dictatorships”.

Within this interpretative context, it is no surprise that the election of November 2003 (with the unprecedented advance of ERC), the meeting in Perpignan between Josep-Lluís Carod-Rovira (1952) and ETA, the terrorist attack of March 11th 2004 and the coming to power of the socialists at State level with the external support of ERC, led Moa to radicalise his discourse. This state of affairs produced *Against the Balkanization of Spain*⁹, a pamphlet that compiles all the previous themes with the aim of calling on Spaniards of all parties to demonstrate in favour of the unity of the Spanish state.

But alongside authors with such high media profiles, we cannot overlook the fact that there is no shortage of historiographical revisionism in the Catalan-speaking Countries. The most paradigmatic case without doubt is the Valencian Country, where the actions of the authorities reach surprising levels: in 2008 the provincial government of Castelló, whose president is the controversial Carlos Fabra (1946), published the book

Habermas stood out for his denunciation of German historians that played down the Nazis’ crimes

■ ⁶ MOA, P., *Los orígenes de la Guerra Civil española*, Encuentro, Madrid 1999.

⁷ MOA, P., *1934, comienza la Guerra Civil: el PSOE y Esquerra emprenden la contienda*, Àltera, Barcelona 2004.

⁸ MOA, P., *Una historia chocante. Los nacionalismos vasco y catalán en la historia contemporánea de España*, Encuentro, Madrid 2004.

⁹ MOA, P., *Contra la balcanización de España*, La Esfera de los Libros, Madrid 2005.

*Spain, An Impossible Dream*¹⁰, written by the ex-colonel José Luis Lapeña Carrasco (1929-2005), in which he justified Franco's intervention "aimed at giving Spain a regime of justice, peace, order and harmony for all Spaniards". While he forgives the leaders of the coup, Lapeña considers that the republicans were on the verge of installing a

The revisionist debate in Spain shows the importance of history as a key element in the current political struggle

Bolshevik republic controlled by the Russians, but they failed due to the resistance of the Spanish middle classes, opposed to Communism and in favour of Catholicism.

This is not the only case denounced in Castelló, where for many years both the city council and the provincial government have been financing books that have in common the rose-tinted view of Franco's dictatorship and

its severe repression while attacking the left wing, nationalism and the independence movement, accusing them of revolutionary standpoints that led to the Civil War. Notable in this field are, among others, Javier Mas Torrecillas and José Luis Tirado.

So, nothing new under the sun. Yet all these elements show us the importance of history as a key element in the current political struggle. For this reason, I consider that these widely read works of history have to be brought to light and denounced for their lack of historical rigour, the manipulations and the anachronisms. Even so, if it is necessary to combat the apologetic tendencies of Francoism and the leaders of the military coup, and the arbitrary reinterpretation of the place occupied by non-Spanish nationalism in the life of the Spanish State present in all these works, it must be done always from a scientific point of view and not from a paradigm of historical truth or a supposed normative view of history. As Enzo Traverso (1957) remembers, official histories end up presenting a theological view of history, another trap into which academic historians have quite often fallen and which may be considered equally bad. The Italian case of the lynching of Renzo De Felice is a clear demonstration of this, as I said earlier. Between one tendency and another only a critical attitude will enable us to understand the past and to understand the challenges of the world we live in ||

■ ¹⁰ LAPENA, J. L., *España, sueño imposible*, Diputació de Castelló, Castelló de la Plana 2008.

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