

◆ Introduction

Memory and Its Discontents: A Central Debate in Contemporary Spanish Culture

Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini

The humanitarian, legal, and political aspects of the debates concerning the most decisive events of Spain's history from 1931 (the year of the advent of the Second Republic) to the early 1980s (when the re-established democracy passed its last tests of fortitude) have constituted the core of the symbolic production of that nation during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The sheer number of plays, films, novels, poems, comics, essays, exhibitions and performances dealing with the recent past is probably unprecedented, as is the way in which those works have both reflected on, and informed, the often-heated discussions about the causes that sparked the Civil War, the repression during and after that conflict, the nature of the Franco regime, and the legitimacy of the so-called Transition. This overabundance of interest was to lead to a point of productive saturation, reflected in the ironic title of one of the most sophisticated works of fiction of 2007: Isaac Rosas's *¡Otra maldita novela sobre la guerra civil!* (Yet Another Damned Novel About the Civil War!). At the present time such tiredness overlaps both with the return to government of the Partido Popular, the party that has been manifestly less interested in engaging in these debates, and a deep financial and social crisis that has moved the focus from (re)imagining the past to thinking about an uncertain future. Ironically, this situation might well provide a propitious space for further reflection on the most salient aspects of the well-known controversies that have centered on history and memory during the first decade of the twenty-first century and which, to a large extent, have shaped contemporary Spanish culture.

It is not as yet clear how productive these clashes over the artistic and public uses of the history of the recent past may have been. However, if one examines some of the specific issues that have garnered the most attention, such as the recovery and management of the remains of the victims of mass

**Memory and Its Discontents: Spanish Culture in the Early
Twenty-First Century**

Hispanic Issues On Line 11 (2012)

executions, the status of the Valley of the Fallen, the legal responsibilities related to the dictatorship's policies as seen from a human rights perspective, or the voids in information about the failed coup of 1981, the balance is not very positive. At best, these and other issues remain in limbo; in other instances they have been officially dismissed.

Professional historians have often felt uneasy with non-academic treatment of subjects to which they have given attention through rigorous research, even if one must also take into account the fact that not all historians have reflected critically on the question of history as practice. Be that as it may, their books are sold in bookstores side by side with those of 'revisionist' authors such as Pío Moa and César Vidal, whose efforts serve their own reactionary ideological agendas and commercial interests rather than the advancement of historiographical knowledge. Some historians are also troubled by what they see as attempts to 'legislate' on the past, as was the case with the so-called Ley de Memoria Histórica (Law of Historical Memory [2007]).¹ This piece of legislation was sought to satisfy the demands for justice of those who felt that the successive democratic governments had not done enough to either redress the offenses of the Franco regime or bring them to real closure. Among the names of professional academics who have criticized official policies regarding history is that of Santos Juliá who, in line with the writer Francisco Ayala, points out that one can only recuperate what s/he has lived and lost (10). Echoing some of the arguments also advanced in another context by Tzvetan Todorov, Juliá asks for a distinction between historical memory and a "política de la historia . . . contar el pasado como instrumento de legitimación del presente" (10) (a politics of history, [that is to say,] narrating the past as a legitimating instrument of the present) and argues that, in the end, "imponer *una* memoria colectiva o histórica es propio de regímenes autoritarios o de utopías totalitarias" (11) (the imposition of *a* collective or historical memory is the mark of authoritarian regimes or totalitarian utopias) (our translation).

The case for not only distinguishing between individual and collective memory, but also reflecting on the uses and abuses of the latter is argued powerfully by Todorov through theoretical arguments and case studies. For him, "memory, in the sense of mental traces, only ever belongs to an individual; collective memory is not memory at all, but a variety of discourses used in the public arena. It serves to reflect the image that a society, or one of its constituent groups, wishes to give of itself" (*Hope and Memory* 132). Todorov reminds us that memory "has many forms and functions" and that "it can be possessed by different people who derive different moral attitudes from it" (*Les abus de la mémoire* 3). His arguments are buttressed by exemplary portraits, from outside the Spanish context, of individuals who not only "withstood" the "onslaught" of totalitarianism, but "also shared a way of thinking, for which the most appropriate label would

be *critical humanism*” (*Les abus de la mémoire* 4). One of the examples adduced is that of David Rousset, who “needed to do more than remember, reiterate, regurgitate, or resuscitate the past. What he sought was an understanding that would form the basis for action” (153), which depended on the “use of memory [to] serve a right cause” (173): the defense of democracy rather than totalitarianism (175). Another exemplary portrait is that of Primo Levi, whose “attitude toward perpetrators of evil can be summarized as: no forgiveness, no revenge, but justice” (178). Yet, Todorov points out that even within Levi’s unflinching belief, a key element of his thought is that of the “gray zone” (also the title of the third chapter of Levi’s *Drowned and Saved*, cited by Todorov 179), or what is excluded from rhetorical moralizing discourse (192).

Todorov’s emphasis on the need for exemplary uses of memory in defense of democracy and against all types of totalitarianisms is also shared by many who have participated in these discussions with specific reference to Spain. At the same time it is clear that democratic Spain’s complex political situation—from the years of its Transition to the devolution of power to the nationalities, to its protagonism in the European Union and involvement in an uncertain global economic order—has led to various reexaminations regarding the uses of memory to illuminate and act upon the present.

Thus, Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones (in this volume), echoes Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” to argue that the memory of the Spanish Civil War could be re-connected with some of the most pressing political discussions and decisions of our time. For Gómez such reconnection would hinge on an important realization: that one is not dealing with an asphyxiating overabundance of memory (as Juliá and others would claim), but too little of it; that in the last two decades, the most “influential discourses on memory . . . have not gone far enough” and that, in fact, many of the “legal, associational, political and artistic” discourses have been assumed by “a coercing [political] framework . . . [by] a semi-naturalized liberal scheme of *recognition*, understood as an always-already-in-place political horizon for the aspirations and claims of those involved in this debate (intellectuals, politicians, journalists, artists, affected families, organizations, and cultural agents and political commentators)” (88). Be that as it may, the value of these discussions is clear: it is virtually impossible to speak about memory and its use (or abuse) without framing the discussion within a political context that involves the present and the future.

The focalization of official discourse on a conflictive and often painful past may seem politically counter-productive, as it generates the sort of conflict that one may deem scarcely urgent and highly divisive socially, especially in a country still marked by the Civil War. One possible explanation for such a risky move is that this reexamination of the nation’s history could offer lessons in civic order and cohabitation at a time when the

transition from the dictatorship to the parliamentary democracy has been desacralized from different sectors. The transitional process has lost much of the aura of an exemplary experience with which it had been bestowed in the 1990s, a period in which Spanish politicians presented it as a model for regime change in emerging democracies, such as the ones in the former Soviet bloc. Recently, however, many voices have claimed that the process of political conversion in Spain was a rather timid one, as it favored risk aversion over retroactive justice (Aguilar), and that, as a result, it produced a democratic system of inferior quality (Colomer). This new, more critical view of the Transition would demand alternative sources for the historical legitimation of the democratic regime, such as the ‘completion’ or ‘correction’ of the transitional process now that the risk of heightened political violence or even civil war is no longer of major concern. Thus the controversies over historical memory feed into the revision of the Transition (which is itself a motif of artistic exploration and social disagreement) and, at the same time, function as active elements toward the refinement of democracy in Spain. This growingly critical perception of the Transition as a flawed process that was to hinder the ensuing democracy is probably one of the key elements configuring the historical logic of the current wave of political protest known as the 15-M Movement.

While the focus of this debate is on Spain, the larger debate about memory and its uses is not exclusive to it. As we have seen in the earlier discussion of Todorov’s work, and as Andreas Huyssen has reminded us recently, “memory has become an obsession of monumental proportions in the entire world.” Within the European context, the cases of Germany and France’s re-examined relationship to their respective roles during the great wars of the twentieth century set significant precedents for what would later be the memory boom in Spain. In the “Foreword” to the English translation of French historian Pierre Nora’s monumental *Les lieux de mémoire* (*Realms of Memory* [1984–1992]), Lawrence D. Krizman observes that “memory is to be understood in its ‘sacred context’ as the variety of forms through which cultural communities imagine themselves in diverse representational modes. In this sense ‘memory’ distinguishes itself from history, which is regarded as an intellectual practice more deeply rooted in the evidence derived from the empirical reality” (ix). In “Between History and Memory,” the general introduction to his *opus*, Nora distinguishes between “places” and “settings” of memory, arguing that the former exist because the latter are no longer “a real part of everyday experience” (1) and that in the absence of the latter we are left with “reconstructed history” (6). He later goes on to express the tensions between history and memory: “Memory is always suspect in the eyes of history, whose true mission is to demolish it, to repress it [. . .] A generalized critical history would no doubt preserve some museums, medallions, and monuments as material necessary for its own work but would drain them of what makes them, for us, *lieux de mémoire*” (3). For

Nora, historiographical reflection (the history of history, or reflection of history as a practice) is key to the liberation of history from “memory’s grip” (4); only when that happens can memory “become a possible object of history” (4). Yet, we know that literary and cultural critics (including some who have written for the present volume) would also argue that historical memory is a way of constructing the past (Loureiro, “Pathetic Arguments” 226) and that, in any case, it involves the construction of plural memories (227). In the end, “[w]hat really matters about the past is its effective and affective memory, the traces that it has imprinted on individual minds and on political practices and institutions, even if it is not ‘remembered.’ The facts are not the truth, and many facts of the past have no bearing on the present” (228).

During the last decade, some of those traces of the past, related to the most conflictive episodes of the social and political history of the country from 1931 onwards, have haunted the imagination of Spaniards—some of whom were not yet born when the events in question took place—and of their Socialist government, which especially during its 2004–2008 term in power not only vindicated the memory of the Second Republic, but also reclaimed its legacy as a source of inspiration for its own policies (Martí and Pettit 24–25). Thus, it should not surprise anyone that those controversies would become an almost inextinguishable source for the work of a great variety of artists. Often, such an aesthetic visitation of the past resulted in a bland approach; a sort of epochal patina limited to what Fredric Jameson would term “pseudohistorical depth” (20). In other instances, there was a clearer attempt at relating the past to the present in historically meaningful and critical ways. But though one may question the finality or the quality of their efforts, it seems clear that the exploration of those issues was to become the most important referent for creativity in contemporary Spain. As such, the Civil War, for example, has been exploited by novelists not only as a specific episode of Spanish history, but also as a situation that facilitates the staging of essential human conflicts, virtues, and weaknesses.

The contributors to this volume of *Hispanic Issues Online* speak to many of these questions from various corners of the political spectrum, both from specific disciplinary perspectives as well as from interdisciplinary ones. Estrella de Diego writes as an art critic and historian who has also been a privileged witness to the developments shaping the last three decades of Spanish culture. De Diego discusses the work of Fernando Sánchez Castillo and Gervasio Sánchez to argue that, unlike those artists who shunned “local” political issues in favor of a reconnection with the international scene after years of intellectual and political isolation, the former have been able to question Spain’s recent history while avoiding the trap of provincialism, managing to do so by raising the question of universal justice and human rights through an engagement with issues such as the fate of the disappeared and the visibility of post-authoritarian legacies. Dialoguing with the work of

these and other visual artists, De Diego ruminates on the options of her own generation (people who now occupy university chairs, newspaper op-ed pages, and high governmental offices) as they manage the lasting consequences of the policies of the Franco regime.

Eric Dickey (in this volume) examines the works of Max Aub, a prolific writer who “felt impelled to document what he witnessed . . . to give testimony to what had happened, not only in Spain during the Civil War, but also in France during exile” (167). Dickey’s essay takes the reader through Antonio Muñoz Molina’s moving speech on the occasion of his own induction to the Real Academia de la Lengua (1996) to pay homage to Aub in an attempt to rescue him from a “culture of disdain.” The speech is said to be an act of gratitude and memory, or, in Muñoz Molina’s words, “agradecimiento es memoria” (68) (gratitude is memory). Through a thorough analysis of Aub’s literary production, Dickey shows how for Aub, rewriting the past is both a way of overcoming trauma and reclaiming his identity, and one of exposing the Franco regime’s policy of collective repression and “memoricidio” of those who were on the other side of the Civil War.

Patricia Keller (in this volume) analyzes the tensions underlying the polarizing effects that have ensued from the memory debates—namely, the friction between willful oblivion, or collectively “forgetting the past,” and the need to remember (both privately and publicly), commonly characterized by a drive to “recuperate the past,” a past that is a fundamental part of the present. Keller suggests that “memory operates both thickly and thinly—showcased in monumental forms as much as exhibited in the miniature, quotidian details of everyday life” (66). Stressing the former, her analysis revolves around an interpretation of the colossal Valley of the Fallen (1939–1959), and examines the ways in which the landscape of the monument and its surroundings enacts a contradictory process of memorialization and erasure. Finally, connecting this geographical and political landscape to recent cultural representations that re-map the contradictions underlying it, Keller considers how such works engage with loss through a politics of mourning, one that might provide a more productive model for rethinking and re-conceptualizing the place of historical memory today.

Cathryn Crameri (in this volume) shows how the debates on historical memory in Spain have particularities that respond to the country’s cultural heterogeneity and different national identities. She points to the Catalan nationalists’ combined use of collective memory, history, and myth to support their own political claims within a context of growing social support for the region’s secession from Spain. Crameri notes further that the public use of history and the debates over it are not confined to the recent past. Rather, they are part of a continuum from the early eighteenth century, when Barcelona was sieged by the troops favoring Philip V, to the recent transition to democracy. By looking at several filmic texts (documentaries, YouTube

videos, and comments on them), Crameri highlights the revisionist discourses that make up the narrative of Catalan distinctiveness. Those discourses are said to have been put forth both by Catalan nationalists as well as by those who defend the idea of Spain's unity.

Like Crameri, Luis Álvarez-Castro (in this volume) shows how the debates on historical memory in Spain are not limited to the interpretation of events that fall within the confines of living memory. Álvarez-Castro initially pays attention to videos dealing with an understanding of the recent past and to the anonymous reactions elicited by them on the Internet, underscoring the wide appeal enjoyed by those topics during the last decade or so (2001–2011). His essay also considers how discussions related to the last Civil War (1936–39) affect the elucidation of older episodes in Spanish history, such as the Peninsular War of 1808–1812 (as it is called by English-speaking historians), or the War of Independence, as it is known in Spain.

In their respective essays (in this volume), Paul Julian Smith and Ana Merino/ Brittany Tullis argue for the relevance of the media they analyze (television and comic respectively) for a comprehensive understanding of Spanish symbolic production and, in particular, of historical memory. Although those media are generally dismissed in Spain as not worthy of scholarly attention, the respective contributions of Smith and Merino/Tullis argue for their substantial impact on the views and education of people on matters that are essential for the development of civic society. Thus, while television has been dismissed as “domestic” or “feminine,” and the comics as “infantile” or “transitory,” the essays in question speak to their impact on the consumer's imagination. Merino and Tullis reaffirm the power of the comic as sequential art to reflect on the personal and social traumas derived from Spain's authoritarian past and its lasting effects. The medium's political and expressive potential is seen in works such as Carlos Giménez's *Todo Paracuellos*, Miguel Ángel Gallardo's *Un largo silencio*, Antonio Altarriba and Kim's *El arte de volar*, and Felipe Hernández Cava and Bartolomé Seguí's *Las serpientes ciegas*. Merino and Tullis emphasize an ethical reading of these works, while stressing the connection between art, memory, and justice.

Smith's analysis centers on *23-F: El día más difícil del Rey*, a mini-series on the attempted coup of 1981 produced by state-owned Televisión Española. The series has a didactic (or propagandistic) intention: that of showing King Juan Carlos I as the hero who saved the day. Smith analyzes this mini-series as “a cultural resource that crystallizes the relationships between popular memory and professional history” (57), which can function “as containers for historical memory and bridges between the public and private spheres” (60). Along these lines, some of the usual sources of scholarly contempt for television, namely its domesticity and femininity, are seen as humanizing elements that contribute to a strengthening of popular support for the parliamentary monarchy that the King embodies. Smith also

points to the presence in the series of the medium's historical self-reflection and self-vindication, a standard feature in Televisión Española's productions at a time when its role and public financial support is under scrutiny (as is monarchic rule, recently under fire due to a string of scandals associated with various members of the royal family). Finally, Smith notices that Spanish Television's attention to the last few decades of the nation's history is unparalleled among its neighboring countries, making the medium "the most voluble and visible refutation of the 'pact of silence' or repressive hypothesis often made by scholars and activists alike as a case against the legitimacy of Spain's democracy" (62). Yet, notwithstanding the popularity and quality of productions such as *23-F*, one wonders about the effectiveness of such productions in the construction of democratic legitimacy if the latter is understood as something that goes beyond an official narrative of the past supported by large audiences, and whose reception, as Smith himself acknowledges, includes many variants.

Sebastiaan Faber (in this volume) looks at both the recent debates among public intellectuals regarding the political developments that span the Second Republic through the Transition, and at fictionalized and documentary accounts of episodes of that same period, including some that are not exclusive to Spain (such as World War II.) Faber notices that the intellectual discussion and the cultural production on those topics since the turn of the century have "shifted from questions of *fact* toward issues of *narrative*, *morality*, and *decorum*" (118). He takes issue with intellectuals such as Santos Juliá and Fernando Savater for defending, respectively, the 'objectivity' of historiography versus the markedly political and legal stance of memory, and the idea of remembering political crimes only while their perpetrators and victims remain alive. Faber's analysis of cultural production by young Spaniards points to a direction that views Spain tied to its international context, thus denying its exceptionality. He also suggests that the latter trend is subject to change, depending on the conditions of the present and the direction of the winds of History.

Ulrich Winter (in this volume) sees a clear transformation in novelistic production since the turn of the century. Questioning the validity of the static conception of memory that guides most research on the matter, Winter focuses on the question of the temporality of memory to explain "the internal logic of the Civil War novel's development, from the neorealism of the postwar period to postmodernism and finally to the cosmopolitanization of memory (and literature) in the 2000s" (12), something which he relates to the changing epistemological landscape in which the genre functions. Winter claims that while pre-2000 fiction was guided by a *narrative* logic, tied to "a linear concept of history and hence a traditional notion of memory" (13), such logic gave way to another that is increasingly based on the *image*. The characterization of the latter is undertaken by comparing Jaume Cabré's novel *Les veus del Pamano* to Javier Cercas's *Anatomía de un instante*.

Within that logic of the image, “both novels de-narrativize the relationship of past and present, one by dissolving the narrative bond between them, the other through the simultaneous presence of past, present, and future states within an image” (30). Winter signals the cinematic and historiographic tensions underlying these texts, and also manages to effectively point out solutions that are unique to literary discourse when dealing with temporality.

Another way of looking at the narrative of the first years of the twenty-first century is offered by Francisco Sánchez (in this volume), who devotes his attention to the recent refurbishing of the old topic of two clashing ideals of Spain (liberal versus conservative), which has been embraced by some authors who contest the kind of understanding of the recent past that emerged during the Transition. For Sánchez, the convergence of the debates on memory and the current financial and social crisis—the most serious challenge to the democratic system since its establishment in the 1970s—has moved to “a more openly critical attitude toward the dictatorship’s legacy and the persistence of attitudes and privileges of Francoism in democratic Spain” (181). He also reflects on the reasons for the proliferation and persistence of sexual imagery or soft pornography in contemporary narrative, long after the demise of the prudish morality propagated by the dictatorship. To explain those issues, he examines the work of Almudena Grandes, who first gained attention in the literary scene with an award-winning erotic novel (*Las edades de Lulú*) and who has now embarked on an ambitious multi-volume narrative project on the Civil War and its aftermath, and at Antonio Muñoz Molina’s latest novel, *La noche de los tiempos*. Sánchez sees the conflation of historical and sexualized narratives as the result of a renegotiation of Spanish cultural identity (still anchored in the firmly established topic of the *two Spains*) within a literary market that is in dialogue with a global imaginary that demands its share of sex.

All of the essays in this volume point to the centrality of historical memory in the Spanish cultural production of the last decade or so. Some of the authors approach the topic more critically than others—or, with varying degrees of enthusiasm about its social and aesthetic relevance. It is also fair to say that we are witnessing a crisis of overproduction from scholarly as well as creative angles, as these years of imaginative and critical pondering of the events of recent history seem to have reached a point of exhaustion. Moreover, the prospects for the national project established during the 1970s (a democratic, decentralized welfare state comparable to its richer European neighbors) also seem to have had a strong negative influence on the cultural scene. Thus, on the one hand, the so-called *great recession* and the politics of austerity derived from it are placing a great deal of stress on Spain’s artistic and academic infrastructures, which are heavily dependent on public funding that is now dramatically reduced through austerity measures. These cuts have had an effect on the activity of authors, researchers, and audiences, and have led to the disappearance of a number of artistic and intellectual

venues. On the other hand, groups and individuals with different political agendas seem to be casting aside the fixation on the past in pursuit of explanations for the current economic and social crisis that envelops Spain and much of Europe. This is not to say that the passionate and often moving discussion on memory will fade, or that the topic has lost relevance; it is simply a matter of saturation, with most positions having been staked.

Notes

1. The official title is “Ley 52/2007 por la que se reconocen y amplían derechos y se establecen medidas en favor de quienes padecieron persecución o violencia durante la guerra civil y la dictadura” (Law 52/2007, which recognizes and expands rights and establishes measures in favor of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and the dictatorship). It is available at www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/12/27/pdfs/A53410-53416.pdf

Works Cited

- Colomer, Josep Maria. *La transición a la democracia: El modelo español*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1998. Print.
- Huysen, Andreas. “It Isn’t Easy to Draw the Line Separating the Legendary Past From the Real Past.” Interview with Sergi Doria. *Barcelona Metropolis*. January-March 2010. Web. 20 October 2012.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. Print.
- Juliá, Santos. “Bajo el imperio de la memoria.” *Revista de Occidente* 302-303 (2006): 7–20. Print.
- Kritzman, Lawrence D. “Foreword.” *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past. Volume I; Conflicts and Divisions*. Ed. Pierre Nora. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. ix-xiv. Print.
- Loureiro, Ángel G. “Pathetic Arguments.” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 9:2 (2008): 235–237. Print.
- Martí, José Luis and Philip Pettit. *A Political Philosophy in Public Life: Civic Republicanism in Zapatero’s Spain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. Print.
- _____. *Realms of Memory*. Trans. Arthur Godhammer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Print.
- Rosa, Isaac. *¡Otra maldita novela sobre la Guerra Civil!* Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2007. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *Hope and Memory. Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Trans. David Bellos. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print.

_____. *Les abus de la mémoire*. Paris: Arléa, 1995. Print.

Martín-Estudillo, Luis and Nicholas Spadaccini. "Introduction: Memory and Its Discontents: A Central Debate in Contemporary Spanish Culture." *Memory and Its Discontents: Spanish Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 11 (Fall 2012): 1–11. Web.
