◆ 8

Accounting for Violence, Counting the Dead: The Civil War and Spain's Political Present

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How do we move from thinking about the public narration and depiction of violence—that is, a concern with representation—into a politics and ethics of life? This is one of the questions that propels Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), and one that has a particular urgency for societies that, like Spain, are faced with the memory of internal violence. Looking at a case like Spain, in fact, invites one to historicize the question. During the Spanish Civil War, when international public indignation over the deaths of innocent civilians as a result of military violence, particularly city bombardments, reached unprecedented heights—in large part thanks to the work of war photographers like Robert Capa and David Seymour—and when, in spite of this indignation, the majority of democratic powers, including Roosevelt's United States, decided against intervention. The Spanish Civil War is interesting in historical terms (how did public opinion and authorities frame the loss of innocent life at the time?), but also in diachronic terms (how has this framing of the events in Spain changed over the past seventy-five years?).

Any discussion about the "ethics of life" in the Spanish context is obliged to take into account the tremendous loss and mutilation of life in the violent five decades between 1931 and 1981, as well as the ways in which democratic Spain has positioned itself in relation to that violence. In recent years, the precise numbers of dead caused by the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath have returned to occupy a central place in the continuing debates about the conflict. And if counting the dead has been one problem for historians of the Civil War and Francoism, another more complicated one has been to account more generally for the unspeakable violence that Spaniards inflicted on each other between 1936 and 1975.

In my essay I consider this doubly problematic—determining the number of victims and understanding the nature of the violence—in relation to an ethical and historiographical question: What is the proper attitude to

adopt, from the present vis-à-vis past acts of violence and their victims? I am particularly interested in positions that frame these questions through notions of national or cultural identity. In reality, though, other more fundamental questions need to be addressed first; fundamental questions that, in the Spanish context at least, are anything but resolved. Should there be a public conversation about past violence in the first place? And if so, who should have it and what should its purpose be? Should the main goal of this conversation be to understand violence, clinically isolated, in its proper historical context? Or should it serve to inform a debate about forms of violence that continue to be operative in the present? Should the conversation about violence result in an assignation of guilt or responsibility, and a concomitant condemnation of the perpetrators and a recognition or reparation of the victims? Or should it resist the temptation of judicialization?

The violence inflicted by Spaniards on each other between 1936 and 1939 has long been framed through culture: Spaniards, the argument went, are simply more prone to extreme violence than other peoples. Versions of this narrative, rooted in the so-called Black Legend, were prominent in the dictatorship's justification for the 1936 coup and the regime's subsequent harsh rule, but also made their appearance in anti-Francoist accounts, such as Gerald Brenan's *The Spanish Labyrinth*. ("The troubles of Spain," Brenan wrote, "come from the belief, shared by almost every element in the country, in violent remedies" (148).) Further, as Paul Preston has most recently shown, the ruthlessness of Nationalist violence toward particular sections of the Spanish population was partly rooted in perceptions among the leaders of the military revolt, who had enjoyed long careers in Spain's colonial army, that Spanish peasants did not share these leaders' identity: they were seen as racially more mixed and therefore inferior.

It can be also argued that, at the level of international politics, the connection between cultural identity and collective positions on violence have become increasingly explicit. Tony Judt has shown, for example, that the collective identity of Europe today is closely linked to the idea that a nation or a people cannot be fully European if they are not able or willing to come to terms with shamefully violent episodes in their own history—primarily, but not exclusively, the Holocaust. "Coming to terms" here stands as a shorthand phrase for a series of actions and attitudes that range from the purely discursive and performative to the more practically political and judicial: they might include the creation of monuments to victims, the issuing of public apologies for crimes committed in the past, the persecution of war criminals, or the granting of reparations to victims or their descendants. Within the Spanish context, the enthusiastic embrace by the Generalitat Catalana of the recovery of historical memory movement and anti-bullfight legislation, in explicit contrast with the much more reluctant

positions adopted by the Spanish national government in Madrid, provides another example of the link between cultural identity and positions on violence. In this context, we should also remember that, for post-Franco Spain, "Europe" and "European" have long functioned as synonyms for a much-desired modernity and normality in political, economic, and even literary terms. The same generation of intellectuals and politicians who orchestrated the transition to democracy, which failed in important ways to "come to terms" with the country's violent past (at least as that process is being interpreted internationally now), and which celebrated the transition as Spain's entry into European modernity, is ironically forced to adopt something akin to an exceptionalist argument to resist calls for a judicial accounting for that violence, for example, by means of a truth commission. Meanwhile, developments in Spain over the past fifteen years, particularly in the wake of numerous exhumations of previously untouched mass graves from 1936–1939, have fundamentally transformed the ways in which the violence of the years 1931–1978 is being discussed, represented, and processed in the Spanish public and private spheres. And while Antonio Gómez is right to state that "for at least some demographic groups, the debate about the Spanish Civil War is also and primordially the debate about (some aspect of) twenty-first century Spain" (89), efforts to translate the renewed interest for a painful past into a viable ethics and politics for the present have encountered significant roadblocks. In this regard, it is telling that one of the most visible recent calls for a moral reveille, by the prominent novelist Antonio Muñoz Molina, ends up dismissing Spain's widespread interest in the country's violent twentieth-century past in the years 2000–2008 as a distraction from the profound political and ethical problems facing Spain in the present, which were brought to light by the 2008 economic crisis.

What makes the explanation and understanding of Spanish Civil War violence particularly complicated in Spain today is the intersection of historiographical, ethical, and political factors. At stake is not only what exactly happened, but also why, more than seventy-five years ago. All of the academic authorities who adopt positions vis-à-vis the violent events of the past are also, at the same time, positioning themselves ethically and politically in the present. This is why Juliá's rejection of "memory" as inherently more politicized than "history" (as practiced by professional academic historians) does not hold water. Pablo Sánchez León has contended, from an entirely different position than Juliá's, that this complication has not been beneficial to the rigor and quality of historical scholarship on the Spanish Civil War. In fact, he suspects there had been nothing less than a "collapse of the scholarly edifice built by the efforts of at least two generations of specialists" and a regression to attitudes that were prevalent in the 1950s that have led to "a collective dead end" (24).

Sánchez León describes an increasingly polarized scholarly landscape that "has begun to resemble a Hobbesian state of nature where different groups of scholars and amateurs fight for their own living space by aggressively attacking the rest" (25). He identifies two main camps. On the one hand, scholars like Preston and Ángel Viñas defend a reading of the Civil War that blames the revolting military for the outbreak of the war; emphasizes the planned, deliberate, and massive nature of Nationalist violence; ascribes the violence committed in Republican territory to uncontrollable and criminal elements associated with revolutionary groups, particularly the Anarchists; and defend the repression of those groups by the Republican government as the only option available given the need to galvanize the Republican war effort. On the other hand, there are less clearly pro-Republican historians like Manuel Álvarez-Tardío and Fernando del Rey Reguillo, who express doubts about the commitment to democracy among the leaders of the Republic.

Beyond their many disagreements, however, Sánchez León argues that both groups share a number of basic features. Both present themselves as examples of scholarly rigor, which in both cases is equated with a dispassionate and exhaustive reliance on documentary evidence, while both discredit each other as blinded by political prejudice. In the end, both also revert back to the "discourse of shared responsibility" and a blanket rejection of violence on either side of the war, while "excesses and misdeeds on the Republican side are exclusively attributed to autonomous groups and networks of more or less formally Anarchist or revolutionary Communist allegiance" (26). In addition to their shared "reluctance to theorize," Sánchez León writes, "both these pro- and anti-Republican lines lack a hermeneutical foundation. Far too often, Preston, Rey and Viñas simply equate documentation with information, and information with truth" (28). In the end, Sánchez León argues, both groups of historians can be considered conservative.

The kind of gridlock and regression that Sánchez León describes, as well as the tendency to sharply mark authorities and competencies with the purpose of excluding or delegitimizing competing narratives, has been typical of the public exchanges around historical memory. Elsewhere I have characterized these exchanges as a *diálogo de sordos*, and speculated what should happen for the public dialogue about the past to be more productive. It is worth exploring, however, what productive might actually mean in the Spanish case. Many critics and commentators, myself included, have almost automatically assumed that a productive dialogue would lead to a form of resolution of the gridlock: the identification of a shared set of values—associated with notions of tolerance, respect, and democracy—that would allow for a proper recognition of all victims' suffering, of all forms responsibility, and the possibility of moving on. In short: a form of

reconciliation, understood as an overcoming of conflict. This, however, may well be a fallacy.

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