Michael Richards:

‘Public objects of remembering and forgetting in contemporary Spain’

Patterns of Prejudice **(forthcoming, 2021): pre-publication version**

In the twenty-first century, the performative nature of the pulling down and throwing into Bristol harbour of the statue of the slave-trader Edward Colston connected the local to the global. Because the slave-trade is at the heart of remembering and forgetting Britain’s imperial past, this act of protest and recollection struck at fantasies of the nation. Participation allowed individual demonstrators to be re-constituted as social actors, animating a collective imagination, sense of history, and political resolution not focused on nationhood. These considerations about the eclipse of the national by the local and the global, and about the politics of oppositional memory work, are central to on-going protests over public spaces and symbolic objects related to civil war and dictatorship in Spain.

Three elements of the process of bringing the concealed past into national discourse in Spain since 2000 have relevance to the Colston case: first, ‘recuperation’ has been animated largely by a focus on objects of affective consequence (including mortal remains) and the ways in which they are made public; second, the level of success has depended on the responses to local civil society activism from politicians with access to state levers of power; and, third, activism has been shaped by a youthful evolution of the political left towards a supra-national emphasis on human rights and ecological demands. There were 1930s’ precedents for all three of these elements.

Political acts in public spaces in the early years of that decade were led by a youthful generation in Spain, inspired - as in much of Europe - by what appeared to be the end of an out-

dated political and social order.[1] Both left and right sought support from the state. In April 1931, a centre-left coalition was elected to end the corrupt monarchy in Spain and institute a republic, aiming radically to improve the lives of the down-trodden working classes and extend liberal freedoms. There were countless public communal acts in celebration of these events. In Madrid, monarchist statues were defaced or toppled, some of them being rolled along the streets by political 'enthusiasts' to the Puerta del Sol, the customary locus of popular secular festivities. In contrast, monuments recalling short-lived nineteenth-century liberal advances became hallowed, used as gathering points for public political meetings. The newly elected authorities promised in 1931 to repair the material damage caused by the political iconoclasm. And yet, rather than viewing the desecration as aberrant, they saw it as signalling hope that 'the people' would safeguard the new Second Republic.

Where the national capital led, local communities in the regions followed. In Málaga - a port city not unlike Bristol - the jubilant crowd (the 'uncontrollable mob' of elite imagination) occupied the bourgeois space at the centre of the city following the result at the ballot box. The intention was to dramatise a suddenly conceivable shift in domination away from local power-wielders which had used financial clout to control all previous elections. The symbol of this dominance was the statue of the second Marqués de Larios, nineteenth-century landowner, industrialist, monarchist and benefactor. Standing at the intersection of the grand central avenue and the waterfront, Larios was pulled from his plinth and dragged to the harbour, where he was hurled into the water. The lower plinth of the monument had been occupied by a subordinate figure intended to represent 'Honourable Labour', which was now elevated by the crowd to take the place of the Marqués. The degradation of the monument was mindless vandalism to the

[1] Eduardo González Calleja and Sandra Souto Kustrín, 'Juventud y política en España: orientación bibliográfica', *Ayer*, 59, 3 (2005), pp. 283-98.

propertied classes, but in local political terms it made sense, betokening the fall of illegitimate authority and (as in Bristol) making a statement of the strength of convictions and unity of the crowd. The compact between the authority of the nascent state and 'el pueblo Republicano' was constitutive of the progressive political moment, but the entrenched holders of social and economic power, acting locally and nationally, obstructed reforms, leading to Republican fractures and ultimately to bloody civil war in 1936.[2]

General Franco's authoritarian regime, born of the civil war (won with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini), lasted until his death in 1975. The July 1936 military coup removed political and ethical restraints. The hundreds killed in Republican Málaga by those acting in the name of 'the revolution' in the early months of the conflict were given dignified burials once the city was occupied (by Fascist Italian forces) in 1937, and memorials were erected. The mortal remains of the thousands then killed by the Francoist authorities in the city were disposed of in unmarked burial plots. There they lay, largely disregarded, as the long dictatorship was followed by a transition to democracy defined by an unwritten 'pact' that was strategically promoted by political leaders of all parties, a social contract to avoid opening the past to scrutiny in case remembering provoked violence. Throughout its long tenure, the Francoist state had monopolised public representation of the conflict-ridden past. Learned amnesia was reinforced by control of history curricula in schools which taught the 'greatness of Spain' and condemned the Republic as 'anti-Spanish' and its supporters as 'Marxist hordes'.[3]

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[2] On the era of the Second Republic witnessing an increasingly confrontational contest between two sets of ideas and images of 'the people', see Rafael Cruz, *En el nombre del pueblo: República, rebellion y guerra en la España de 1936*, (Madrid, 2006).

[3] Eg, Joaquín Arrarás, *Historia de la Segunda República Española*, vol. 4, (Madrid, 1964), pp. 174, 231; Manuel Aznar Zubigaray, *Guerra y victoria de España (1936-1939)*, (Madrid, 1942), p. 98. The Francoist decree of December 1936 to 'purge' education stated that the 'revolutionary hordes' were 'the spiritual children' of liberal education. After 1939, commemorative plaques were raised in the public squares of communities large and small celebrating 'liberation' from 'the Marxist Hordes': eg, Ronald Fraser, *The Pueblo: A Mountain Village on the Costa del Sol*, (London, 1973), p. 120.

The transition's 'pact for forgetting' was largely unchallenged until the late-1990s, when vigorous civic associations began to emerge with national and regional structures - though more often functioning locally - calling for social justice and the 'recuperation of historical memory'. Though many younger supporters have since joined, the creators of the movement possessed a generational identity. Born in the 1960s, they are, in effect, 'grandchildren of the war', at one remove from the imposed sense of fear and shame which had silenced the war's children - their parents - born during the 1930s.

Spain's tragic war was deeply destructive in social and cultural terms, generating a violent purge during the early Franco years, which - through executions and widespread imprisonment, and through the social and economic consequences of the war - dismantled communities of solidarity associated with the Republic. Reversal of 1930s land reform, legalised discrimination in employment, and complicity of civilian society in repressive cruelty, all had a fracturing effect and fuelled a migratory movement towards the relative anonymity of cities, beginning in the 1940s. The post-1990s recuperation of memory was thus necessary, not only because of the silencing effects of the transition after Franco, but because the social pre-requisites of collective remembering had been uprooted during the long years of dictatorship.

The experience of the dictatorship and the nature of the long transition to democracy have informed twenty-first century calls for a recuperation of historical memory. Between 2000 and 2011, grassroots action came together with political advocacy, crystallising around exhumations, the making visible of the remains of Republican victims in unmarked burial sites. In contrast to the isolated and circumspect excavations attempted during the political transition of the late-1970s, vital elements of legitimation were drawn protectively around the process, including open petitioning for official democratic endorsement, scientific monitoring by forensic archaeologists

(including collection of DNA), and the gathering of contextual local knowledge by anthropologists and oral historians in the form of personal testimony. Sharing of methods and results was made possible through global transmission of grave-side photographic imagery.

The counterpart to this task of revealing the past by exposing the bones of the dead has been removal of many of the physical traces of glorification of Franco and his regime, including memorials, statues, and street names, the latter becoming highly controversial in Madrid when, after years of conservative city government, local political power shifted to the left in 2015. The process has inevitably been political because it addressed the paradox of visible symbols of the authoritarian past amid Spain's democratic present which were perceived to undermine a sense of common citizenship. More often than not, the focus has been local, emphasising the intimate experience of public spaces in provincial towns and small cities. In the largest cities, by contrast, the putative nation has been the main reference point. The relative diffuseness of Spanish national identity meant that removal in 2005 of the most famous equestrian statue of Franco, outside the Ministry of Housing, in the north of Madrid, by order of the left-leaning central government (circumventing the conservative city authorities), had no impact of the sort seen over Colston in Bristol.[4]

Catalan national identity and nationalism is something different. In 2016, for instance, an open-air Barcelona exhibition included the city's own equestrian statue of the dictator, which had been consigned to a warehouse since 2008, where its head had been lopped off and lost. Placing the headless Caudillo alongside a reconstituted sculptural allegory of the reforming Second Republic of the 1930s – a work originally destroyed by the dictatorship – was intended as a way

[4] Although the director of the Real Academia de la Historia stated that it demonstrated 'a lack of respect for the past'; that the statue was comparable to an archive and had to be conserved to promote 'knowledge and understanding of the present': *El Mundo*, 17 March 2005.

of opening up questions about the history of physical symbols and ask why they were tolerated or not. It was ironic, therefore, that the display provoked protests calling for all symbols of Francoism to be removed from the streets. These ended with the Franco statue's destruction and premature closure of the exhibition.[5]

When the state has been in the hands of the Social Democratic PSOE (in government in 2004-11 and sharing power since 2018) it has been responsive to the claims made upon it by the memory associations. The conservative Partido Popular (PP) - with historic connections to the dictatorship and the Church, and with an interest in resisting what it sees as disruption of the national narrative - has been hostile to 'opening old wounds'. In 2007, the PSOE passed a 'Law of Historical Memory' by which 'the rights of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and dictatorship are recognised and measures established in their favour'. The law has been widely interpreted as demonstrating official acceptance that the grievances of campaigners arose from a fundamental shortfall of political legitimacy of the post-Franco democratic settlement. Its provisions - including a new accessible archive (the Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica) and government support for exhumations - focused largely on a less far-reaching but necessary aim: finding ways of making the past accessible to those affected. State funds dried up, however, under the PP government of 2011-15 and conservative local authorities have been unsupportive.[6]

A greater stumbling block has been the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's monumental pantheon to the civil war martyrs, in the form of an ultra-Catholic basilica and monastery, which

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[5] The irony of de-facing an already headless figure appears not to have been widely noticed. Ajuntament de Barcelona, *Franco, Victòria, República: Impunitat i espai urbà*, (Barcelona, 2016). These events were just a year before the Catalan independence referendum held on 1 October 2017 and declared unconstitutional by the Spanish government.

[6] The government budgetary contribution to carrying out the provisions of the Historical Memory Law were cut by 60% amid austerity in 2012 and disappeared altogether in the subsequent years of the PP regime. The state office for coordinating exhumations was closed down: *El Mundo*, 2 March 2012 and 29 September 2012.

became his burial place in 1975, built by Republican political prisoners during the hungry 1940s and 50s. The spectral presence of the dictator after 1975 precluded this peculiarly dissonant monument ever being perceived popularly as a national symbol of reconciliation. Moreover, despite authoritarian illusions, Spain was never a simple nation-state, as we have seen. In addition, the 'radioactivity' given off by Franco's tomb was intensified by the post-2000 public detailing of the presence in the basilica's crypts of the remains of tens of thousands of Republican war victims, secretly exhumed from unmarked burials around the country by Francoist authorities since the 1950s, which intensified a widely shared sense of perpetual symbolic violence.[7]

In 2011, a committee of historians appointed by the PSOE government recommended removal of the General's remains to a family mausoleum once parliamentary consensus had been obtained, a move carried out with support of the Supreme Court in October 2019.[8] Plans to remodel the complex as an education centre may yet bear fruit.[9] Equestrian statues were expendable, perhaps, but the Valley of the Fallen is valuable as a multi-layered site, an important reminder of past events and their potential consequences, and meaningful to students of history wanting to decode nationalist ideologies, but aware that the past is hugely complex.

As well as a focus on public objects with symbolic and affective significance, and the role of government, civil society memory activism has been conditioned by a post-2000

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[7] Queralt Solé i Barjau, *Els morts clandestins: Les fosses comunes de la guerra civil a Catalunya (1936-1939)*, (Barcelona, 2008); 'Inhumados en el Valle de los Caídos: Los primeros traslados desde la provincia de Madrid', *Hispania Nova*, 9 (2009): http://hispanianova.rediris.es/9/articulos/9a009.pdf. On the experiential dimension of the monument (including, briefly, empowering and disempowering effects), see José Manuel Barros García, 'Political artefacts, aesthetics and heritage: the Valley of the Fallen', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26, 3 (2020), pp. 253-66 (esp. p. 259).

[8] In the relevant 2017 vote, PP deputies abstained. The PP has voted against or abstained in all votes related to removal of Francoist symbols since 1980.

[9] Although fracturing of the two-party 'system' since 2015, and the rise of populist nationalism, present considerable difficulties.

emphasis on human rights, which is attractive because it has the potential to draw attention away from the nation and nationalism.[10] The end of the Cold War, turbulent globalisation, and instability around the nation state, have provoked a search for new political and moral bearings in Europe and beyond, a task to which history and the past have not unreasonably been put. In opposing commemoration in 2000 of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the dictator's entombment, for instance, activist grandchildren of the war consciously identified with the ideals of the generation of the Republic. It was immoral that victims of political violence who in the 1930s had defended the public freedoms and universal rights of the kind valued in democratic Spain should remain buried anonymously and ignored.

In the early 2000s, the conservative PP had governed with particular indifference to youthful public opinion over such crises as the *Prestige* oil-tanker environmental disaster in 2002, Spain's involvement in the US-led war in Iraq (without parliamentary consultation and against overwhelming public opposition), and the government blaming ETA for the subsequent devastating attack by an Islamic fundamentalist group in Madrid on 11 March 2004. Post-crash austerity, from 2011, further polarised politics. The public statements of young memory campaigners throughout this period have borne witness to the country's inescapable position within global structures. Looking back, Spain's transition to democracy had, according to memory activists, been based on a 'pact for consumerism and economic development', as though free market capitalism was sufficient to tranquilise people and justify silence about the past.[11]

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[10] See, eg, indictment in 1998 of Augusto Pinochet of Chile by a progressive Spanish magistrate applying the principle of universal jurisdiction, although extradition was prevented.
[11] Victoria Ginzberg interview, January 2003:
http://www.foroporlamemoria.info/documentos/victoria_ginzberg.htm.

Local memory activity has thus been framed and re-vivified by convergent global matters of urgency and a universalist conception of justice.[12]

In 2014 a UN report on truth, justice, and reparation in Spain identified the incompleteness of the moral rehabilitation of the victims of the civil war and dictatorship. It indicated that the difference between a commemorative landscape as a source of necessary education and remembering, on the one hand, or as a source of daily symbolic undermining of a sense of safety and security normally attested to citizens by a democratic state, on the other, should be obvious enough.[13] As in Bristol, re-paying the symbolic debt through a broad social and political recognition of those who suffer marginalisation and discrimination, in the past and in the present, ought to be possible without a need to impose a canonical history.[14]

[12] See, eg, on-going Spanish civic associational collaboration with Amnesty International and the UN Working Group on Forced Disappearances on judicial investigation in Argentina on Spain's war and dictatorship.
[13] Pablo de Greiff**,** Misión a España**:** **'**Informe del Relator Especial sobre la promoción de la verdad, la justicia, la reparación y las garantías de no repetición**'**, 22 July 2014.
[14] On the need for an open democratic history of the present, as part of the current secondary school curriculum in Spain: Fernando Hernández Sánchez, 'La enseñanza de la historia del presente en la España actual: Entre el agujero negro y el relato intencional', *Studia Historica. Historia Contemporánea*, 32 (2014), pp. 57-74.