

Jordi Casassas

In the beginning was memory

IN MORE HISTORIC DENSITY, MORE INTERVENTION OF MEMORY

Let me begin with an anecdote and verification. Between 1975 and 1986 numerous seminars, congresses and symposiums were held in order to commemorate the Second Republic and the Civil War. Then-young historians made the most of these opportunities to present their first research pieces on a subject that had previously been prohibited for them, one way or another. Their work, moreover, was in response to a generational demand, one coming from society as a whole, a society that was emerging from the Franco dictatorship with a need to know everything that had been snatched away from it, and to recover its origins so as not to lose its identity.

I very well recall how the *vellets* (the *oldies* —the name given by the historians to the “witnesses” of these times— who were then still the “oral sources” that were most active and committed to their memory) started appearing in every session after one of the first big congresses, for example that held in Tarragona in April 1981 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the inception of the Republic (as a result of which four volumes had to be published because of the avalanche of papers). Their statements in the open-floor sessions were met with evident distaste because of the permanent tension they represented and because they constituted the way into the present for a number of hyper-politicised, individualist ruckuses of meticulous and extemporaneous detail, and were thereby tantamount to a vexing intrusion for the choral explanations that almost all claimed to be heirs of a previously unquestioned hegemony of historiographic structuralism. For their part, the *oldies*

seemed to have a yen for (intimate satisfaction in) revising matters for the young historians, adducing their direct participation in the events and, progressively, denouncing the “professional” historians for misinforming, or simply because it seemed that they wanted to conceal some events that the *oldies* deemed essential.

The verification to which I referred above is fruit of simple observation of what has subsequently been happening: the witnesses have been disappearing for natural reasons and, for their part, some of the young historians of those days have, in the last few years, turned into determined agents for the sacralisation of that “historic memory” they had within their grasp for a time; a small group, moreover, they have also become agents for the politicisation of memory, of this declared duty of “remembering” imposed by the Catalan powers-that-be and materialised in the so-called Memorial Democràtic¹.

Second, a paradox. Catalan society of the decade from 1975 to 1986 (although it began to demobilise and fragment after March 1980 for reasons pertaining to the politics of autonomous status) was one that was steeped in history through and through and that consisted of individuals and groups that were historically shaped: family, school, unions and a good part of the subsequently dubbed “civil society” at this stage had already incorporated the national dimension into their cultural, political and life horizons, while the national debate completed and forcefully re-impelled a historicity that some decades earlier seemed to have a prevailing structural component. Courses and seminars on the history of Catalonia, conferences, study grants (the case of the pioneering Fundació Bofill [Bofill Foundation] is paradigmatic), congresses, et cetera, were frequent events and any self-respecting function or panel discussion had to have its historian. Moreover, we historians of this historicist Catalonia were in continuous professional contact with our economist, geographer and literati colleagues, along with others from the domain of law since we shared a political-cultural space with the historic dimension as its backbone.

In all this, however, professional and academic (university, in fact) history generally kept a distance from the witnesses of the time and the associations that these witnesses kept forming, while joining them was not as much as considered. In academic history, moreover, “oral history” occupied a very marginal position and, in many cases, rather scant prestige until quite some time later². In the 1970s, working in historical biography was even frowned upon since the individual case was not considered to be methodologically significant or of sufficient explanatory value³.

■ ¹ This organism is described on a Generalitat (Catalan Government) website (<http://www10.gencat.net/drep/AppJava/cat/ambits/Memorial/index.jsp>) as “an instrument designed to implement public policies for the recovery of democratic memory”. The website of Memorial Democràtic is <http://www10.gencat.net/drep/AppJava/cat/ambits/Memorial/index.jsp> [translator].
² In France, however, it was not until much later that people were talking of the priority of “testimony” in the recounting of history.

See Annette WIEVIORKA, *L'ère du témoin*, Paris 1998.

³ A pioneering example of academic history in which archive sources are contrasted with numerous “oral sources” and fused in telling the story of a local space is the study by Joan VILLARROYA, *Revolució i Guerra Civil a Badalona, 1936-1939* (Revolution and Civil War in Badalona, 1936-1939), which was published in 1985.

AN AMNESIAC TRANSITION?

All in all, the assertion that the Spanish transition shelved the Civil War due to the requirements of the “political script”, in order to head off any critical judgement of the past that might bring about the failure of the way to transition and encourage the dangerous path of rupture, is only partly true. In those years, the inflated importance of works on the times of the Republic and the Civil War monopolised the field, to the point that foreign historiography, which had previously been the inescapable reference, almost dropped into the background. Again, the methodological problem of oblivion, of the need for oblivion in human cultural processes, as Nietzsche described it very well in his time, went far beyond the requirements of any specific “political script”.

The need for oblivion in human cultural processes went far beyond the requirements of any specific “political script”

Still more, this historicist wave of the transition entailed the first real territorial extension of the practice of history, along with the overwhelmingly powerful irruption of the memorialist strand. In the former case, one must refer to the appearance of the section “Plecs d’Història Local” (Local History Papers) in the review *L’Avenç* (in 1986, the year of the big explosion of historiographic commemoration on the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War) and, in the 1990s the creation of the Coordinator of Catalan Language Study Centres: local studies forcefully incorporated the detail, the anthropological dimension, the anonymous voices and, along with all that, consideration of testimonies of the time, of individualised memory.

As for testimonies expressed in books of memoirs, we might say that this came out of quite an impoverished panorama: however, the outstanding cases of Claudi Ametlla or Amadeu Hurtado were soon overtaken by a veritable avalanche. J. Termes was able to highlight this in his reflections on the Civil War (1986) and, around the same time, Albert Manent began to do something similar in the field of literary history. Likewise, we must not overlook the creation and subsequent getting underway (operative since 1985) of Josep Benet’s Centre d’Història Contemporània de Catalunya (Centre of Contemporary History of Catalonia) and the systematic task of collecting testimonies from the time that was carried out there. Neither must we forget (though it would be punishable in speaking of the matter of historic memory) the phenomenal waves of criticism coming from academic history against the work of this centre (and that of such specialists as Joan Villarroja or J. M. Solé) since it was claimed that their only concern was to “count the dead”: the dead that are now about to be honoured with the highly expensive operations of their exhumation from mass graves and identification through DNA testing⁴.

■ ⁴ The two aforementioned historians had jointly published a pioneer study, “Les víctims dels fets de maig” (The Victims of the Events of May) in *Recerques*, 13, 1982, apart from other pieces such as “Les víctimes del 19 de juliol” (The Victims of 19 July) and “Víctimes de la repressió durant la guerra i la postguerra al Maresme” (Victims of Repression during the War and Post-war Years in the Maresme). Then again, there is J. M. SOLÉ’s doctoral thesis, *La repressió franquista, 1939-1953* (Francoist Repression, 1939-1953), which was published in 1985.

HISTORIC MEMORY AS A CULTURAL FACTOR

With all this, not yet twenty years after this lengthy dimension of the transition, so fruitful and sensitive to history and memory, the changes had taken on truly staggering dimensions⁵. The paradigm of this so-called historical memory was being imposed everywhere until it became a phenomenon that was breaking free from, and even going beyond, the limits of history itself, at least the ones of what is known as academic or professional history⁶. This coincided with the converging processes of the fragmentation of historic discourse, the crisis of security in old scientific paradigms (Marxism, the French Annales School, Anglo-Saxon-style relativism) and, above all, with the general de-historicisation of society⁷.

The crisis of tradition, the breaking of traditional bonds between parents and children, is a great historical theme

None other than E. J. Hobsbawm began his explanation of the framework that led him to speak of the 20th century as the “brief century” (1994) by alluding to the destruction of the past that was appreciable at the end of the century: the disappearance of mechanisms that had linked the experience of contemporary people with those of previous generations; a great rupture in the history of western civilisation when young people are forced to live in a kind of permanent present, in a

present that is already future. In fact, the great profusion of literature that attempts to explain the present rise of historic memory and the difficult relations that appear between historic memory and history almost always starts from this very place.

In any case, the crisis of tradition, the breaking of traditional bonds between parents and children is a great historical theme and it has its chronology and its characteristic spaces: urban space and the great rupture that the Great War represented when millions of peasant-soldiers saw, all of a sudden and with all the violence of which technology was capable, their traditional references being smashed. In this regard one must always refer to Maurice Halbwachs (who died in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945) and his pioneering approach to the matter in the 1920s.

Let us give another example now, one that is also linked with this initial phase: the lecture given in 1935 by the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga —who died in 1945 in captivity imposed by the Nazis in 1942— and that was later to become the book *In de schaduw van morgen* (In the Shadow of Tomorrow). His present was determined, he said, by a cultural crisis of unprecedented scope, by a “presentiment of the decadence” that affected him in the form of his present since, given the prevailing scientificism,

■ ⁵ Of unquestionable interest here is the book by ENZO TRAVERSO, *Le passé, modes d'emploi. Histoire, mémoire, politique*, Paris 2005.
⁶ Notable here is Paul RICOEUR'S book *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris 2000. Ricoeur, following ideas advanced, *inter alia*, by H. HUTTON (1993), came to formulate the idea that history attempts to

respond to questions formulated by memory in such a way that it turns into yet another of the dimensions of memory.
⁷ See WALTER BENJAMIN *Iluminaciones* (2 vols.), Taurus, Madrid 1971-1972 [published in English as *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Schocken, 1969, translator].

the feeling of an irreversible social process was being imposed and generalised, where the “peaceful” concept of development was set against the violence of revolutionary change, and where the possibility of looking back to the past in order to come out of the crisis was denied: a tremendous rejection of defining oneself through the past.

MEMORY AND HISTORY

We are therefore faced with a double dilemma in relation with this theme of historic memory, of its cultural ascent and its implications in present-day post-traditional societies. On the one hand is understanding the cultural phenomenon it represents (a phenomenon that, as we have seen, has quite distant roots, however) and, on the other are the methodological implications it has entailed for historical science itself and in the way of working of academic historians⁸.

In a complementary fashion, with regard both to historic memory as a cultural phenomenon and to the historiographic evolution it entails, it would seem logical to think that, equally as important as philosophical reflections and method should be study of the matter as a significant cultural phenomenon of contemporaneity, and, as such, one that cannot be extricated from considering the specific spaces where it becomes evident, the range of dynamics in relation with which it materialises, and the different chronological rhythms in which it makes its presence felt⁹.

We know, for example, that this phenomenon was tardy in reaching Spain (and the absolute majority of the Partido Popular did a great deal for its definitive emergence)¹⁰. And we know that, in Catalonia, it has had its own, distinct way of materialising and becoming evident (through to the parliamentary and legal order), even with regard to Spain, although, as is evident, state legislation on the matter also affects it.

Here I wish to make a brief comment on the methodological journey that has led historians to incorporating this so-called historic memory into their intellectual horizons and historiographic practice. The first impression is that there was very little prior theoretical debate on the matter. The irruption of the subject of Methodology of Social Sciences in our universities was of very little use in this regard precisely because it involved the “criminalisation” of all the currents that have ended up leading to the incorporation of historic memory as a central element of historic discourse. However little memory we may have, we shall remember how the great majority of those who now talk about memory and history clearly took sides in the debate between Lawrence

■ ⁸ These questions have also been studied from other fields and for some time now. Thus, from psychology it is said that, for the human mind, “the present is the past”, and also the “rememorative context of the present” that acts at the instant in which the memory is produced. See Joan Coderch, “La dialèctica passat present en la ment humana” (The Past-Present Dialectic in the Human Mind), *Lletres* 32 (April-May, 2008), pp. 28-31.

⁹ See Henri Rousso (ed.), *Stalinisme et nazisme*, Brussels, 2002, a work in which he offers an overview from comparative history [published in English as *Stalinism and Marxism*;

History and Memory Compared, University of Nebraska Press, 1999, translator].

¹⁰ A work like that of Paloma AGUILAR —*Memoria y olvido de la guerra civil española* (Memory and Forgetting of the Spanish Civil War, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1996)— would not have a successor for many years. On the subject of Spain, see the excellent piece by Pedro RUIZ TORRES, “Los discursos de la memoria histórica en España” (The Discourses of Historic Memory in Spain), *Hispania Nova*, 7, 2007.

Stone and E. J. Hobsbawm in 1979 over whether or not the old scientificist paradigms and their pretension of all-comprehensiveness had had their day or not, and about the need or not for a return of traditional narrative forms as a richer way of explaining reality¹¹.

The majority of academic historians at the time, needless to say, took up positions that were clearly opposed to the critique of the possibilities of traditional structuralism and in favour of the Marxist postulates championed by Hobsbawm. Simultaneously, the immense majority was declaredly against interdisciplinary contact with anthropology, not to mention social psychology, or the thematic inclinations of the third or fourth generation of the *Annales* School historians¹². It is possible that one of the only cracks through which, paradoxically, neo-romantic historiographic subjectivity might have filtered was that of the popularisation of the work of the Cuban writer Manuel Moreno Fraginals and his premise of “history as a weapon” (1984). But this proposal was sold here as a revolutionary mandate with which Marxism was revived through contact with the struggle against imperialism, without thereby losing its essence. Nevertheless, the end of the social emergencies of the Spanish industrial reconversion (determinant in the general climate of the transition) and the rapid decline of real socialism in the East brought about the disintegration of such euphoria (which never had a decisive influence in the academic milieu), and it quickly crumbled into dust when the charismatic Cuban sought political asylum in Miami¹³.

■ ¹¹ In any case, Hobsbawm himself was not long ago calling for a restructuring of the “modernising coalition” or the “front of reason” (which he identifies with Marxist historiography), protecting himself from the onslaughts of postmodern subjectivity and of those who deny the cognitive, objective and universalist capacity of History. See E. J. HOBSBAWM, “History a New Age of Reason”, concluding speech to the British Academy at the Conference *Marxist Historiography: Alive, Dead or Moribund?* (November 2004).

¹² At the time, the pioneering work of Pierre NORA (ed.), *Les lieux de la mémoire* (Paris 1984-1986), did not generate excessive expectation or followers (and neither, as far as one can tell, does it seem to have been translated into either Spanish or Catalan [though it appeared in English as *Realms of Memory*, Columbia University Press, 1997, translator]). Equally, one of the works that Nora cites as one of his main founts of inspiration, that of G. L. MOSSE, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, Howard Fertig, 2001 (first edition in English, 1974) did not appear in Spanish until 2005 (thirty years after the Italian translation!) and it has not been much cited in our historiography, in contrast with what happens with the historiography of our neighbours. In Italy, the response to Nora’s book might be that edited by M. ISNENGI, *I luoghi della memoria. Simboli e miti dell’Italia unita*, Rome-Bari 1998.

¹³ In any case, it is always surprising how the bases of the great assertions that at a certain point take on a great power of suggestion have been formulated in the past. In relation with the chain that, for Marxists, joins past and future through our present struggle, one should note the work of Edward Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, when he states that the present has to retain the past and announce the future because mental acts are always in relation with the external world, moved by an intention. See HUSSERL, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (three volumes: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (Nijhof, The Hague 1982); *Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*; and *Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences* (Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1989 and 1980 respectively). The work was published in Spanish as *Ideas relativas a una Fenomenología Pura y una filosofía Fenomenológica* in 1949.



We could expand on these historiographic memories but it seems they would have little new to offer. Not even, for example, when women's history (as it was then called) left off simple theorisation and methodology and went deeper into closer realities did the structuralist paradigms modify themselves to the slightest degree. Subsequently, the importation of the concept of gender (well into the 1990s) represented a change of paradigm, but it was imposed as a rupture without any chance of taxonomic continuity with the earlier phase. In our country, the history of the subaltern, of the "small voices", of the Foucault-style approach, or even that of an E. P. Thompson or a Carlo Ginzburg (approaches that date back to 1963 and 1976!) had inappreciable practical repercussions in the real exercise of contemporary history¹⁴.

MEMORY AND POLITICS

All in all, we might conclude, along with the Bulgarian-born French critic Tzvetan Todorov (Sofia, 1939), that recovery of the past is one thing and its subsequent use is quite another. It is here that the other dimension to which I referred earlier intervenes: the cultural dimension of the rise of historic memory and the role it plays in today's post-traditional western societies¹⁵.

To continue with this Bulgarian-French writer, recuperation of the past involves three actions or phases that we can distinguish, at least in the methodological framework: systematisation of the facts (where truly democratic history that is respectful of the reader's competence should end); the construction of a sense: a task that cannot elude the historian's labour in all that it means to interpret, hierarchise, establish causes and consequences of events and interrelate them; and, finally, a last phase of instrumentalisation of the past: a use that responds to present-day needs, the mere mention of which very often revolts the sensibility of many historians as they prefer to think that only a few colleagues have let themselves be dragged into this, and that, when they do, they get mixed up with the great horde of discourse-producing agents that have proliferated in this present phase of definitive rupture in the relations between historical and political discourse (so peculiar to the crisis phase of powerful ideologies)¹⁶.

Present discourse on memory takes us back to this phase of instrumentalisation of the past but, concomitantly, to a stage of a change in cultural sensibilities and public use of history: a reflection on the traces left by the past on a society "without a past", on an omnipresent and all-understanding present that has had to rework the place it had to leave to this past, while also rethinking the mechanisms it granted itself in order to recover it.

■ ¹⁴ In any case, it is always surprising how the bases of the great assertions that at a certain point take on a great power of suggestion have been formulated in the past. In relation with the chain that, for Marxists, joins past and future through our present struggle, one should note the work of Edward Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, when he states that the present has to retain the past and announce the future because mental acts are always in relation with the external

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¹⁵ TZVETAN TODOROV, *Les abus de la mémoire*, Paris, 1995.

THE PARADOXES OF HISTORIC MEMORY

Besides any evaluation we might make, we cannot but confirm the coincidence of this presentist crisis of the western civil consciousness along with a veritable expansion of the public use of history: academia has lost its former well-nigh monopoly to a host of communicators, producers, and mass media practitioners, politicians and, in short, all the people who are well-situated *vis-à-vis* the new demands of the market. No matter that this excessive use of historical products is in inverse relation with the diminished number of hours devoted to systematic history teaching in secondary schools. What is in step is the practice of a “new” teaching with students who are made to “play” interactively with the material and who are not to be bothered with knowledge that is deemed too arid (in France, they even speak of the “ignorant teacher” who does not impose knowledge and encourages the students to learn by adducing his or her own nescience).

The history that is imposed, once these students have become consumerist citizens, is shaped by fragmentary and almost always decontextualised content, which is moved most of the time by what we might

call the “sensationalism of the retrospective” (Nazism and the extermination of the Jews furnishes an endless supply of material in this regard). Some have gone so far as to call it “topolatry” or simply “Disney history” (the tendency to turn everything into a theme park)¹⁷.

Coherence becomes total. It is as a result of this situation that present-day democratic politics can go back to trotting out and rediscovering practices we thought were banished after the defeat of the dictatorships (no power can prohibit or command the memory of the people since it is a natural attribute of individuals and collectives): the conversion of history into a value judgement, into civic pedagogy (including “democratic” anti-historic judicialisation of the past, as Henry Rousso has denounced)¹⁸, that not only avails itself of memory but turns it into the substitute of history¹⁹.

With due use of the techniques of communication and apposite language (even museographic language or that pertaining to tourism of memory), this great supplanting of history by memory has had the virtue of communicating to the public the idea

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■ ¹⁶ TZVETAN TODOROV, *Mémoire du mal. Tentation du bien*, Paris, 2000.

¹⁷ This cultural adaptability was explained by the British neo-evolutionist ethologist RICHARD DAWKINS in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), which he later generalised from the individual to the setting as a whole in *The Extended Phenotype: the Gene as the Unit of Selection* (1982). According to Dawkins the “memes” (he speaks of memetics), or basic units of memory, are the great vectors of cultural transmission and survival that act in a way that is similar to the functioning of genes in the survival of the genetic characteristics of the individual.

¹⁸ The growing tendency of “schlerotisation of memory” was denounced in the jointly written work of E. CONAN and H. ROUSSO, *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*, Paris 1994 [*Vichy: an Ever-Present Past*, Dartmouth, 1998].

¹⁹ Coinciding with these great changes, the theme of memory has become a preferential field for disciplines like neuroscience and also child psychology. One of their conclusions (already advanced by sociology more than eighty years ago) indicates that human expectations turn out to be fundamental in perceptions and in determining social behaviour and, here, perception of the past comes to be essential in the establishment of these social relations.

that it is real democracy that has permitted it to come truly and definitively into direct contact with history, which had hitherto been wrested away by too-abstruse professionals. Everyone should be warned that myth-making, induced amnesia or aberrant manipulation by the powers-that-be or victors affects both history and memory.

In sum, it is probable that these new situations will not be satisfied with a simple following of foreign fashions or mere subordination to the laws of the market (as one can see with a glance at the shelves in bookshops and the big department stores) and that they will end up entailing a taxonomic debate within academic history itself, which, in the long term, will bear fruit when the methodological discussion moves on to specific work and a revision of the great traditional schemata. However, for the moment, practically all we have at our disposal, in fact, are the great methodological assertions or those of “memorial-style” collections superimposed on “traditional” writings done on the basis of archival proofs (which are still deemed the most reliable).

Among mortals, only J. L. Borges' *Memorioso Funes* (Funes the Memorious) was condemned to remember absolutely everything. The rest of us are faced with the events of the past through the trace it leaves in the spirit of individuals and in (through?) material facts (including documents). But we are all aware that we do not remember everything and neither do we remember the totality of facets that make up the facts we do remember. When memory makes its presence felt and wishes to irrupt into the mechanisms of recovering the past, we should not forget that one essential part of this recuperation is constituted, as I have noted, by the same oblivion that equally affects history and memory: as I said, the sacralisations and desacralisations are valid for both.

A REFLECTION ALMOST BY WAY OF CONCLUDING

We can accept that the use of memory in the contemporary western world is the reflex of nostalgia for a past that inexorably moves away. We might say that at the root of this commemorative obsession induced a relatively short time ago by the powers-that-be one finds the crisis of tradition that, as we have seen, affects contemporary societies through and through. History has become swifter than the generational changeover and society defends itself from the frenetic change with this resort to the memory of individuals. Again, we must confirm that this great reconsideration of the value of memory has started out from the shock of the tremendous contained forms of violence of the civilised world in the 20th century and from the shock, too, of subsequent ideological concealings, “freezings” and obfuscations (the case of the word *Shoah*, or catastrophe in Hebrew, being used to refer to the Holocaust is paradigmatic). Thus it is logical that history should admit (for example with Paul Ricoeur or Jacques Le Goff) that, even while it is the ordered and systematic narration of the past, what must be done is to try to respond to questions formulated by memory; hence, memory can become one of history's terrains of preferential research. Nonetheless, we cannot forget either that the democracies themselves contributed to the “freezing” of memory, especially in the tough years of the Cold War, but before that as well.

The only thing that remains to discuss is what is happening with this dynamic relationship between history and memory when we leave the field of immediate history,

of present, actual time or whatever one might want to call this space where historian and witness can share experiences that are almost personal (at most with one or two generations of difference). At this point, we would be leaving, however, our field of central interest to probe into the causes that have led to the growing importance of the approaches of cultural history, its apparently good connection with the laws of the market and its ability to dilute by feeble thinking the most resilient and, until relatively recently, untouchable essences of structuralist historiography.

There is one last consideration that pertains to the express political use of this historic memory. The historian has the obligation of asking about the whys and wherefores of the appearance of a sweeping cultural-political phenomenon like historic memory at any particular time. In this regard, one cannot fail to note that there has appeared in both Western Europe and in Spain-Catalonia

an impetus working in favour of “historic memory” and observing a dual chronological rhythm: one is long-term and related with the progressive incorporation of the memory of the Shoah into philosophical, historiographic and, finally, political sensibility (this had zero repercussion in Spanish historiography until the end of the 1960s and early 1970s); the other is more short-term, and is the application of this sensibility to the key moment of the past in which it is possible to question the foundations of coexistence of present-day democracy in each of the countries we are talking about (Vichy and the Resistance in the French case, the Saló Republic and the partisans in the Italian case, the Civil War and immediate post-war period in the Spanish case, and the different situations brought about in the East under Bolshevik rule, et cetera).

In the case of recovering the memory of the martyrdom of the Jewish people something happened which is similar to what occurred with the revision of the “guilt” of the German people in the terrible barbarism of the two world wars put together. Almost two decades had to go by before it was possible to speak of it again: at the crossroads of history and political ethics, with writings such as those of J. Habermas and in the phenomenal new novelistic vehicle which, in the 20th century, translated (alongside sociology) general conceptions of society with contributions by people like G. Grass.

However, in the cases of the judicialised revisions of other countries, it would seem to be fairly clear that this has not happened until the respective democracies have felt sufficiently out of danger, due to the disappearance of the communist opponent and the temporal distance of the facts being judged; events —and this we cannot forget from the standpoint of historical knowledge— in the responsibilities game from which not even democracy itself was exempt (and who can forget the responsibility of the western democracies in the endurance of the Franco dictatorship after 1945?).

There is a coincidence of this presentist crisis of the Western civil consciousness along with a real expansion of the public use of history



The present memorialist agitation has been founded on a resort to universal moral values and a major decontextualisation of the past

The present memorialist agitation has been founded on a resort to universal moral values and a major decontextualisation of the past. At the bottom of this huge cultural and political operation we must look for the desire to re-create democratic values in the phase posterior to the “end of history”, to transform this into a timeless endorsement of the individual rights that were trampled on by the clash of western countries in the great crisis of the 20th century, into a sort of security-assuring device (which, as historians very well know, has never appeared in history) so that this past will not be repeated, in a collective morality where the new civilised coexistence of individuals must be guaranteed. One of the keys that make it possible to take on the moralising political value of historic memory lies in the desire of the powers-that-be to endow it with legal capacity and thereby to communicate to the citizenry that Judicial Power and the Constitution constitute the great guarantee, through a move whereby the “past” and the present become inextricably linked.

In this formidable memorialist operation it has been possible to inter the previous and historic phases of the now-censured “national reconciliation”, these presently being amply overtaken by modern democratic consensus with which it has been possible to leave behind, it is said, the old empire of fear and its paralysing amnesias. In this supposed historical purging of civilisation, the Spanish and Catalan cases are equally exemplary. In the period of transition, which I have been using as a chronological reference, we saw how the story began: in the coronation speech of Juan Carlos I (November 1975), the Crown wished to present itself as the institutional chance of reconciliation for all Spanish people, a process that culminated with what is known as the law of “national reconciliation” of October 1977. The time of democratic satisfaction (evidently “assisted” by the almost reactionary arrogance of the absolute majority of the Partido Popular) has been that of judicialised memory: in July 2006 the socialist party, PSOE, was finally able to present to Parliament the law of so-called historic memory, a law of “rehabilitation of victims” (Spanish), extending to all victims of antidemocratic barbarism in the 20th century²⁰.

■ ²⁰ Something similar has happened in Italy. The State has instituted a Day of Memory (27 January), a Day of Recall (10 February) and a Day of Freedom (9 November) and there, like everywhere else, recall of the victims ends up blurring recall of the specific circumstances in which they suffered difficulties, persecution or death.

²¹ The Law of Democratic Memory is dated 31 October 2007 (DO 12 November) and, in it is contemplated the establishment of a Directorate General of Democratic

Memorial of the Generalitat (Government) of Catalonia. Regarded as affiliate entities are the Baix Llobregat Association of Democratic and Historical Memory, the Hospitalet Anti-Francoist Bridge of Freedom Association, the SEAT Workers' Association for Democratic Memorial, the Enrique Lister Association, CJC-Communist Youth, Women of 36, the New Horizons Foundation, the Forum for the Defence of the Aged, the Pere Ardiaca Foundation and Historaulla.

THE CASE OF CATALONIA

In Catalonia, the passing of the “Memorial Democràtic” bill (once the deadlock of the first “tripartite” Government was negotiated) specified somewhat more and gave the limelight to the victims of reactionary oppression in the exercise of ensuring and/or permitting the survival of democracy in our country²¹. Here the scope of designation has been much wider and it is said that Catalonia “shares with other countries the historic duty to remember the victims of the Holocaust” and also promoted are memory policies that centre on the new identity of democratic states, their democratic transition and the moral and social recognition of all citizens who gave their best in order to preserve these essential values. In the law it is stated that “the preservation of the historical memory of a country is, then, an expression of freedom”. Cited among the functions of the Democratic Memorial are expansion of knowledge, commemorations and the fostering of democratic memory (without specifying which organism is to determine the democratic degree of the different memories) and knowledge of the period of the Second Republic, of the Republican Generalitat (Catalan Government), of the Civil War, of the victims of ideologically-, conscience-, socially- or religion-based conflicts, of the repression of the Franco dictatorship, of exile and deportations, and of the attempt to annihilate Catalan language and culture, as well as anti-Francoist values and actions along with all the traditions of democratic culture. Again, it states that scientific and objective knowledge of the recent past will stimulate understanding of present times²².

Besides these considerations over who might keep being interested in the historical decontextualisation of the emotive recycling of these memories, the factor that is being imposed in Catalonia refers to the identification that has been made of this policy of memory with political postulates and strategies of left-wing progressive stances (and still of one particular current)²³. This discourse, at bottom, so full of dogma, is reminiscent of what was formulated in the years immediately after 1945; and it has caused some commonsense voices to be raised in favour of preserving the past from party-biased political commitments²⁴. Within the great western process in which the different strands of the left are committed to finding an ideological discourse that would enable them to recover their lost identity, it would not seem that the most appropriate thing is to subscribe to the ahistorical and normativised confusion between memory and history, a confusion that sooner or later can turn historically against itself²⁵. It would not seem that the argument according to which the right is the great opponent of the recovery of memory can last very long as the prime justification ■

Jordi Casassas is professor of Contemporary History at the University of Barcelona.

■ ²² The Law affirms that it is inspired in Article 54 of the Autonomy Statute of Catalonia of 18 December 1979, in which it is stated that the Generalitat and other Catalan public powers have the obligation to “watch over the knowledge and maintenance of the historical memory of Catalonia as a collective heritage that bears witness to the resistance and the struggle for democratic rights and freedoms”.

²³ In France it has been said that it is the generation of '68 that, with the fear of being forgotten, has

turned its former militancy of prophetic action into a “retroactive inquisition”.

²⁴ For example, Barbara SPINELLI, *Il sonno de la memoria. L'Europa dei totalitarismi*, Milan 2001.

²⁵ There is no need to expand on this to any great extent; suffice it to read the Prologue to the intellectual testimony represented by the book of Josep BENET, *Memòries I. De l'esperança a la desfeta (1920-1939)* (Memoirs I: From Hope to Defeat [1920-1939]), Barcelona 2008.