

2015

Review of Michael Richards, *After the Civil War: Making Memory and Re-Making Spain Since 1936.*

Ludger Mees

University of the Basque Country, Bilbao, mees@fake.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Mees, Ludger (2015) "Review of Michael Richards, *After the Civil War: Making Memory and Re-Making Spain Since 1936.*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1212>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol40/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Michael Richards. *After the Civil War. Making Memory and Re-Making Spain Since 1936*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 393 pp.

I was just organizing my notes and preparing this brief review article, when *El País*, the most important Spanish daily newspaper, published an article titled “The historical memory will be a compulsory content in Andalusian classrooms.”¹ The paper informed the readers that the Regional Government of Andalusia had submitted to parliament a new draft bill (“Ley de Memoria Histórica”) which, among other issues, aimed at implementing in the curriculum a “rigorous education” regarding the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. The draft defined the concept of “democratic memory” as the right “to know the truth about the history of the Andalusian people in their fight for their rights and freedom, the right to justice and the right to reparations.” This is exactly the issue of Michael Richard's book “After the Civil War,” where he tackles the problem of how the memory of the Spanish Civil War was constructed, shaped and socialized for close to eight decades, from 1936/39 to 2007. The book ends in 2007, highlighting the passing of the “Law of Historical Memory” by the Spanish parliament, but, as the aforementioned news published by *El País* shows, the book's topic is still very much relevant to modern Spain. It is a book on history, but at the same time on recent Spanish politics.

The author's key concept that lays the groundwork for the whole investigation is that of cultural trauma. Relying on the theoretical works of scholars such as Finney, Gillis, and Kansteiner, Richards defines cultural trauma as a “tapestry of historical constructs depicting specific painful events which is shaped by the *post facto* interplay of political power, social relationships and agency, and shared structures of meaning” (1-2). It is thus a collective, and not merely an individual phenomenon, which is rooted, as Richards explains in his introduction, in one particular feature of the Spanish Civil War: The War was fought out on the battlefield, but also to a great extent on the civilian home front. And, unlike the war, this fight within communities did not end in 1939. On the contrary, its consequences (repression, hunger, deadly diseases) continued for many years. The statistics reflect the magnitude of this post-war violence: According to Richards' calculations, three-quarters of the total war-related deaths in the period 1936-44 were non-battle fatalities.

Franco's victory in 1939 and the subsequent establishment of his dictatorship divided the country into two opposite blocks: While the side of the victors was provided with institutional support for the task of tackling the past and establishing a collective memory in order to understand and come to terms with what had happened, those on the side of the defeated republicans suffered a cultural trauma as a result of the impossibility to construct their own memory and cope with the dramatic individual and collective experiences of

1 “La memoria histórica será contenido obligatorio en las aulas andaluzas”, *El País*, October 13, 2015. .

the previous years. This situation only started to change after Franco's death in 1975 and the implementation of the new democracy, but -and this is one of the most surprising findings of the book's final sections- even during the years of the socialist administration under president Felipe González, the shift towards a recuperation of the dignity and memory of this second part of Spanish society only progressed very slowly and after considerable reluctance and opposition.

The book is divided into three major parts (I: "Setting the scene"; II: "Memories of war during the Franco years"; III: "Memories of war after Franco"), and a total of 12 chapters plus the final conclusion. Though the organization of the contents follows a chronological criterion, the narrative combines and intertwines chronology and analysis. All theoretical or conceptual thoughts are concreted in the light of examples and case studies. The result of this blend between chronology and analysis and between theory and empirical concretion is a fluent prose that facilitates the understanding of the complex issue also for readers who are not experts in the contemporary history of Spain. Of special interest particularly for readers abroad is the first introductory section, where the author provides key information about the political culture of pre-Civil-War-Spain. This is crucial for an understanding of the war as well as for its violent consequences, since this political culture had "not been developed for popular participation and was unaccustomed to compromise, negotiation and policy implementation" (37). After 1939, violence became the most important tool used by the new regime against all those who had been on the wrong side during Franco's "*Crusade*", independently of the victims' real implication in the war. The physical violence was framed by the shaping of a particular discourse of legitimation, according to which the rebels had carried out a "*Crusade*" in order to save the true and authentic Spanish nation from liberal democratic deviation, Freemasonry and communism. Since the danger emanating from these *anti-Spanish aggressors* had not ceased in 1939, it was necessary to continue fighting and eliminating any dissent and non-conformist behavior, as well as punishing all those who had joined the anti-Spanish lines and opposed Franco's *Crusade*. In this historical memory based upon the core idea of the legitimate *Crusade*, there was of course no place for the defeated. Yet, while pointing out very clearly the ideological and institutional origin of post-war violence, repression and official memory-shaping, Richards' account is not a simplistic story of black and white, of good and bad. Rejecting this kind of militant and unilateral perspective, throughout the nearly 400 pages of the book, he makes a great effort of presenting a well-balanced analysis that, without falling into the trap of a moralistic assignation of culpabilities, focuses on the dialectic relationship between the two poles as the real driving force of history. In this sense, to mention just one example, the regime's violent imposition of its own historical memory based upon the *Crusade*-myth, benefited from the fact that, on the side of the victims, remembering was always painful and without offering any tangible advantage, so that, in

consequence, “a tacit agreement to 'forget' was entered into” (98). Furthermore, after years of turmoil and suffering, “there was an understandable preference for stability, and many accepted that this would be achieved in part coercively” (105).

Another example of this realistic, unimpassioned and balanced analytic view surfaces during the 1950s, a decade of at first timid, and then rapid change, during which it became evident that the regime was not monolithic and that, also due to the evolution in certain sectors of the Catholic Church, initial frictions concerning the historical memory appeared. Using the example of the Blue Division and their veterans, Richards underlines the fact that important sectors of the regime did not consider the symbolic celebration of an organization known for its evident link to Nazi fascism to be convenient. Richards concludes: “Instead of a single monolithic memory of victory and conquest, there was in reality a plurality of collective memories even amongst the victors” (146). One of the consequences of this competition was the gradual abandonment of the *Crusade* narrative. It was substituted by a new discourse that was considered more appropriate for a situation of rapid socioeconomic transformation and the urgent necessity of integrating all sectors of society into one political project in order to prevent social and political unrest. This new core idea and ideological grounding of the official historical memory was that of the war understood as a “fratricidal conflict”, a war between brothers that had been “a senseless and tragic act of collective madness of which all Spaniards were to some degree culpable” (280). This was, without any doubt, an attractive offer to all those who had been expelled from the official Francoist Spanish nation, millions of Spaniards who had been forced to migrate from the countryside to the new urban centers aiming to escape repression, social control and hunger and misery. Yet, as the author states very clearly, this new and apparently more inclusive memory was nothing more than a badly disguised edition of the old Francoist discourse, because it put on the same level both the crimes committed by the aggressors against a democratically established political and social system, and those triggered by the military rebellion by different sectors of society in response to the aggression against the Republic.

In any case, this new myth of the “fratricidal conflict” had an obvious appeal after the dictator's death, and even after the socialists' electoral victory in 1982. Even though Richards does not subscribe to the well-known thesis of a “pact of silence” during the Transition to democracy and subsequent years – he mentions a bulk of articles, discussions and films in the mass-media, as well as different pieces of scholarly research- he does admit that many people who opposed the Franco regime and rejected the claim of a general “silencing” of “forgetting”, felt “ambivalence” about this, because of their “reluctance (...) to 'open the wounds’” (307). This is why, in terms of historical memory, Richards points out that the policy of the González administration was devoid of any notion of “institutional rupture”. Instead, as the scarce publicity given to the 50th anniversary of the putsch in 1986 made evident, the socialists

preferred avoiding the mention of the past with the argument that the most important thing to do was to look to the future and recover the lost time for the modernization and international recovery of Spain and her reputation and influence. Of course, this surprising socialist passivity and reluctance to contribute to a reshaping of the historical memory and a definitive substitution of the myth of the “fratricidal war” by a new narrative that incorporated the perspective and necessities of the regime's victims would not resolve the problem of this sector of the Spanish society which until then had not had a real opportunity to create their own historical memory. On the other hand, it was true that the fast-moving political context (1991: Arab-Israeli Peace Conference in Madrid; 1992: Olympic Games in Barcelona and Universal Exhibition in Seville) would create a mental climate that facilitated the sidelining and obscuring of thoughts and activities linked to the past. Yet it still remained a fact that, far from being eliminated or resolved, the necessity of a greater and better apprehension of the traumatic past became increasingly evident after the conservative victory in the 1996 elections, after which an authentic “memory boom” developed. Now, from the benches of the opposition, the socialist PSOE would support this movement much more actively than it had when in government. One of the consequences of this new attitude was the unanimously supported declaration by the Spanish Congress on 20 November 2002, the anniversary of Franco's death, by which the deputies of all parties rejected the use of violence for political purposes (establishment of a dictatorship). This unanimous vote was only possible because the PSOE, while still in opposition, renounced to include in the text of the declaration a clear condemnation of the military coup, and so the PP deputies' attitude remained ambiguous.

The next step forward in tackling the problem of the cultural trauma and shaping of a new historical memory inclusive of those who had previously been excluded was the setting up of an inter-ministerial commission to study the situation of the victims of Francoist violence during the war and the dictatorship. This commission was initiated by the new PSOE government after winning the 2004 elections. The work of this commission was concluded in 2007 when the Cortes voted the new Law of Historical Memory including different dispositions aiming at the rehabilitation of the victims, the recognition of the right to receive public aid for their families, the commitment to coordinate the excavation of war victims from unmarked pits and the prohibition of pro-Francoist symbols in the public space. This is the final point of Richards' book², which concludes by reappraising some of the initial theoretical thoughts on the social and constructed nature of cultural trauma, the necessity of a dialectic analytical perspective and the difference between “memory” and “history”.

2 It might be added that the conservative government under President Mariano Rajoy has de facto suppressed the law by eliminating all budget items established by the previous government for the implementation of the law.

Richards' book is a major contribution on an important issue of Spanish contemporary history. Not everything in the book is new and previously unknown. Several of the accounts can be found in a similar way in other publications, including some of those published in earlier years by Richards himself. Yet, the book is a very special and valuable contribution for several other reasons. First, instead of focusing on a particular, single historical period, it deals with nearly one century of history from the precedents of the Second Republic until 2007. This "longue durée", dynamic perspective allows for a better understanding of one of the key points in Richards' account: the malleability of the historical memory in response to political power, group interests and changing parameters of social relationship. Second, the book is the result of the evaluation of a huge volume of direct sources and secondary bibliography. There are very few important books missing, and in this case, it is perhaps as a consequence of language problems.³ And third, the display of the arguments is well organized and convincing, with very little errors, omissions, deficiencies or questionable assertions. To mention just a couple of minor points: the reader would welcome more empirical data that permit to follow the author's explanation of massive migration as a direct consequence of war and political repression; long sections with a footnote nearly after each sentence are exhausting challenges to the reader's patience and should be avoided; the memoirs of Laín Entralgo are certainly important, but not as important as to quote them in every chapter several times and in very different contextual circumstances; and finally, -this is perhaps the most important error- UDC was not "one of the predecessors of the CiU, which had been unified as a new party in 1978" (354). *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* was one of the two parties which in 1978 created the stable coalition (or federation, but not party) of *Convergència i Unió*, maintaining for both parties their organizational independence. In fact, in 2015 this coalition collapsed after the withdrawal of UDC due to their disagreement with the pro-independence strategy carried out by their partner *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* and Artur Mas, the CDC regional president of Catalonia. However, as I have already underlined, these are only minor points of little importance. To put it in a nutshell: Richards' "After the Civil War" is a brilliant contribution both to recent Spanish history and to the restoration of the dignity of all the Spaniards that have been, for too long, forced to suffer a deep cultural trauma.

Ludger Mees
University of the Basque Country, Bilbao

3 For instance, one of the major contributions of the last years is written in German. See Bernecker, Walther L. and Brinkmann, Sören: *Kampf der Erinnerungen. Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg in Politik und Gesellschaft*, Nettersheim: Verlag Graswurzelrevolution, 2006, 377 p.