
The Duty of Memory

Reflections on Remembering the Spanish Civil War and Francoism

Adriana Minardi

The Duty of Memory

Reflections on Remembering the Spanish Civil War and Francoism

Adriana Minardi

Abstract

This paper delves into personal memories (Ricoeur 1996)¹ of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, as recounted by various individuals in their narratives about Barcelona. From October 1996 to January 1997, the Institut de Cultura de Barcelona organized a series of discussions titled “Converses a Barcelona” at the Palau de la Virreina, including eight talks under the title “Diaries of Postwar Barcelona: 1939-1975 (*Dietari de posguerra. Barcelona: 1939-1975*). These talks aimed to kickstart a discussion about Barcelona and its people, grounded in the idea that Barcelona is a city of dialogue where recent memories and experiences can be revisited.

Keywords: memory, Barcelona, chronicles, dialogue, Francoism, Spanish Civil War.

Memory: Uses and Duty

“It was an enormous house where nothing ever moved. Not an ashtray, not a piece of furniture. It seemed like everything would remain as it was forever.”
El día que entré en Barcelona – José Luis de Villalonga, 5.

The collection of eight talks, edited by Arcadi Espada under the title *Dietario de Posguerra*, prompts us to ponder the diverse journeys taken by intellectuals and writers such as Juan Marsé, José Luis de Vilallonga, or Ana María Matute as they recall Barcelona during Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975). These eight narratives are primarily rooted in individual experiences. The theme of the series required participants to recount their experiences as chronicles of a single day under Franco’s regime. However, it is evident that narrating this significant day requires a specific type of memory—one that evolves from being personal to becoming a perspective, one voice among many in a collective and polyphonic memory. This collective memory can be traced back to the “one Spain” ideology, which, for the victorious side, meant the suppression of communities like the Galicians or Basques² But what does such a diary signify forty years after the Spanish Civil War? Why term these life stories diaries rather than mere chronicles?

Todorov (2000) asserts that when the past event carries a tragic nature, the right to know the truth or truths transforms into a duty—a *duty of bearing witness*.³ After Franco’s demise, this duty, though examined through the Transition Pact, translated into the emergence of testimonial and autobiographical genres.⁴ Numerous symposiums, meetings, and informal gatherings aimed to recover memories and truths, not only regarding the Civil War but also the harshly repressive post-war period. However, if these uses belong to the so-called official memory, what criteria distinguish between their *appropriate* and *inappropriate* use? One potential misuse of memory involves erasing the memory of the defeated; we would clearly classify this as an inappropriate use of memory. Yet, we can also consider a criterion that scrutinizes the nature of testimony.

The Chronicles

Rather than mere “chronicles,” the eight narratives already mentioned are better viewed as discursive pieces embedded within a social memory. This memory holds the remnants of a tradition—a mark that is not uniform but rather consists, as Lotman (1996) suggests, of diverse dialects of memory.⁵ These dialects of memory also contribute to the notion that the uniform culture sought by Francoism failed not just due to the illogical nature of censorship, as noted earlier but also because of its ineffectiveness in erasing alternative ideological semantic domains.⁶ These domains not only persisted but even emerged, thanks to the regime itself, as seen in the case of the radicalized maquis militancy. In this sense, cultural memory is not singular; it encompasses the circulation of texts and the emergence of local semantics. These local semantics allow us to contemplate a creative memory as opposed to a purely informative one. These narratives, as cultural texts, stand in defiance of time. The memory paths and journeys they describe rest on two foundations: firstly, the social memory that must be reconstructed—a concept we define as the need to regain lost time. This involves temporal shifts, returning to the original home, family, shared nucleus, and ultimately, the social bonds present in a prehistory. Secondly, the space given to this reclaimed time: cities as physical spaces, images, and backdrops, but also as pivotal discursive spaces for alternative memory. The anti-Franco Barcelona and the mythical Madrid of resistance (with less circulation of emerging culture) are the spaces that shape the paths of these dialects of creative memory.

The Social Memory of Time and Space

Time, as a way of shifting and reshaping our memories in a creative manner, functions within the ‘here and now’ of the present democratic society. It is a characteristic of a world that is described and discussed, constantly retelling stories from the past – these stories are specific personal experiences that make up the framework of the historical account or chronicle. These narratives emphasize the division of history into two periods: history, or as Juan Benet has argued, history begins with the Civil War.⁷ From then on, only two times exist: that of prehistory, often the world of childhood, home, and discovery, and that of history: the Civil War and Franco’s battle to enforce forgetfulness. Ramón Serrano makes an unusual choice by telling the stories of people, like those involved in a fight over rationing. He also explores the development of new relationships that became apparent during the early stages of people’s awareness and gatherings, as seen in events like the ‘Jocs Florals,’ which were introduced by the Franco regime:

“I moved through the lines of the Auxilio Social, a cooperative of former prisoners and persecuted individuals, and my gaze was drawn to the absence of legs, arms, and hands among the men. [...] Until I stumbled upon the gatherings of the time, in the early fifties. It was then that I learned of a rich tradition of *tertulias*, whose roots stretched back to the previous century and materialized in the memory of a certain bohemian Barcelona at Els Quatre Gats”⁸⁹

In contrast, Vilallonga recounts the day he entered Barcelona after its fall: “That was the day I realized that the world had changed, and it had changed forever. That nothing would ever be the same again.” The ruined Palacio Maldá, in the narrative, gains significance as it bears the marks of the present. The memory of those who had fought on the victorious side without conviction is represented in the mirror—the only intact element:

“In one of the smaller rooms, there was a huge 19th century mirror from the time of Isabel II, adorned with leaves and flowers. The mirror was intact [...]. I recalled what had happened with Gregorio Marañón, on the Madrid front. [...] There was a mansion there that had also been completely destroyed, and we also found a large intact mirror. [...] Both of us bent down, picked up a chunk of rubble, and threw it at the mirror. Being intact in that destroyed house was almost obscene”¹⁰

This notion of annihilated space is not foreign to the communicative intent of the speakers. The only object that remains untouched is the mirror, not the individuals. History is marked by an enduring war that persists in contrast to the early history or prehistory, which is often characterized by the image of the grandmother. She is seen as the most influential person in that alternative collective memory, capable of foreseeing the end of the original place and articulating the reasons for this without self-censorship:

One day she said:

- I have great contempt for the poor.

And my father said:

- *What* did you say?

She replied:

- Yes, because... How many of us are rich? Very few. And how many are poor? Millions. Yet, they still put up with us. I don't understand it”¹¹

In these narratives, the prehistory character of the grandmother stands out as the dominant force, in sharp contrast to the characters from the post-war period and, particularly, those who are in exile. For these exiled individuals, their homeland has been reduced to sensory experiences like smells, sounds, and voices; it is no longer a physical place but exists solely as a memory. History is the history of rationing: food, gas, electricity, but above all, word. In this regard, censorship

has a particular function not only in genres like theater or novels but also in the everyday Spanish language and even clothing. Ana María Matute recalls the sensory images and memories of the Valencian Horchatería: the taste of childhood, along with being in the sun or with her father. However, for Matute, the time of history is divided into a time and space of war and another time and space under Franco. In the gray post-war period, Barcelona takes on a significant role as a backdrop for writing and as a crucial experience for individual self-identity. Wandering through the city, and particularly leisurely walks in the Barrio Chino and along the Ramblas, come to symbolize freedom and resistance against the authoritarian regime. But what is interesting in Matute's account is the connection between gender and protest:

“Writing is a form of protest. I write for people to read me, I write to communicate, to explain, to inquire, to protest. I'm very blunt. Nothing affects me. Neither fashions, nor ways, nor customs, nor what is done now. I write the way I like, and I've always done so. I've always been the Matute woman”¹²

Llorenç Gomis' account, on the other hand, focuses on the memory of his mother in 1959. With integration underway and the wear and tear of censorship, he recalls the entry of Luis de Galinsoga, director of *La Vanguardia*, into a Barcelona church just as one of the two masses permitted in Catalan was being held. When he utters the phrase “catalanes de mierda” (Catalans are shit), resistance makes itself known through words, in a memory that Gomis attests in an ironic ballad to the treatment of Catalan versus Castilian Spanish. Here, Galinsoga is ridiculed and accused of equating Catalans with Muslims, a clear reference to the common enemy of that united Eternal Spain.

Coda

While these chronicles emphasize personal experiences, it is not coincidental that narratives of this kind began to emerge in the 1990s, peaking in 2007 with the Historical Memory Law (*Ley de Memoria Histórica*). These texts could not, culturally, have been created in the immediate post-war period. At that time, adventure comics like “The Hundred Knights of Isabella the Catholic” (*Los Cien Caballeros de Isabel la Católica*) were still starting to emerge. In this comic, wearing a mask was necessary for someone who believed they were originally Muslim but had converted to Christianity. They had to hide their true identity to avoid persecution. This idea of wearing a mask was explicitly focused on individual identity. The language used in the media, the official speeches of the government, and advertising all aimed to create a false reality that could erase the evidence of destruction. Often, buildings displayed images of Franco and José Antonio with the yoke and arrows. In April 1940, in Barcelona, there was a celebration at the Victoria cinema marking Hitler's birthday. The event was attended by the

German community living in the city, and there was even a large portrait of Hitler displayed. Around the same time, Serrano Suñer, a prominent Spanish politician, was making visits to Mussolini in Italy. However, despite these events, Barcelona consistently portrayed itself as a city known for exploring and developing a different shared memory or history. Ramón Serrano's account brings attention to the grassroots jazz culture. It challenges the perspective that often views the lower class negatively or as inferior. Instead, it sheds light on the transformation of a particular place, the Jamboree basement in Barcelona. Originally, it was a bar known for its patrons, including prostitutes and marines, but it eventually became the city's premier jazz club.

In this context, these written narratives help us grasp the connections between memory, history, and the city. These connections are based on the concept of discursive memory. Contrasting this with Franco's official memory, different historical narratives, and other cities serves a purpose: it enables the emergence of a new type of memory: that of the citizen who needs to move beyond the rhetoric that defines their so-called eternal identity.

Endnotes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *La memoria, la historia, el olvido*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996)
2. Adriana Minardi, "Hacer la Historia: el sentido de práctica discursiva en *Qué fue la guerra Civil*, de Juan Benet. La construcción del intelectual después de Franco", *Espéculo*, 28, (2005a).
3. Tzvetan Todorov, *Memoria del mal, tentación del bien. Indagación sobre el siglo XX* (Barcelona, Península, 2000).
4. The Transition Pact in Spain, also known as the "Pacto de la Moncloa" or the Moncloa Pact, was a significant political agreement reached in 1977 during the Spanish transition to democracy. It played a crucial role in stabilizing the country after the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975 and in laying the foundations for Spain's modern democratic system.
5. Iury Lotman, *La semiósfera*, (Madrid: Cátedra, 1996).
6. Minardi, Adriana, "Trayectos urbanos: paisajes de la postguerra en Nada, de Carmen Laforet. El viaje de aprendizaje como estrategia narrativa". Madrid: *Espéculo*, 30, (2005b)
7. Minardi, "Hacer la historia".
8. A tertulia is a social gathering with literary or artistic overtones.
9. Ramón Serrano, "La primera noche que entré al Jamboree", in *Dietario de posguerra*, ed. Arcadi Espada (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2006), 90.
10. José Luis de Vilallonga, "El día en que entré a Barcelona" in *Dietario de posguerra*, ed. Arcadi Espada (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2006), 15.
11. De Vilallonga, "El día en que entré a Barcelona", 17.
12. Ana María Matute, "La noche de la 'Primera Memoria'", in *Dietario de posguerra*, ed. Arcadi Espada (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2006), 165.

Bibliography

de Vilallonga, José Luis. "El día que entré en Barcelona." In *Dietario de posguerra*, edited by Arcadi Espada. Barcelona : Anagrama, 2006.

Lotman, Iury. *La semiósfera*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1996.

Matute, Ana María . "La noche de 'Primera memoria'." In *Dietario de Posguerra*, edited by Arcadi Espada. Barcelona: Anagrama , s.f.

Minardi, Adriana. "Hacer la Historia: el sentido de práctica discursiva en *Qué fue la guerra Civil*, de Juan Benet. La construcción del intelectual después de Franco." *Espéculo*, n° 28 (2005)

Minardi, Adriana. "Trayectos urbanos: paisajes de la postguerra en Nada, de Carmen Laforet. El viaje de aprendizaje como estrategia narrativa." *Espéculo*, n° 30 (2005).

Ricoeur, Paul. *La memoria, la historia, el olvido*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica , 1996.

Serrano, Ramón. "La primera noche que entré al Jamboree." In *Dietario de posguerra*, edited by Arcani Espada. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2006.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *Memoria del mal, tentación del bien. Indagación sobre el siglo XX*. Barcelona: Península , 2000.

Biographical Note

Adriana Minardi holds a PhD in Literature from the University of Buenos Aires, and an Adjunct Researcher from the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). She is a regular Adjunct Professor at the University of Buenos Aires and a researcher at the Instituto de Filología y Literaturas Hispánicas "Dr. Amado Alonso". She has been a lecturer at numerous international conferences, and a guest lecturer at several universities in Latin America and Europe. She is the author of the books *Arriba España: los mensajes de fin de año by Francisco Franco. An ideological-discursive analysis* (2010); *Memoria, historia, discurso. Variaciones sobre algunos ensayos benetianos* (2012); and *Formas del ensayo en Juan Benet* (2020).