

REVIEW ESSAY

Between the Streets and the Ivory Tower: Citizens, Historians, and the Place of Historical Debate in Contemporary Spanish Historiography

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IZQUIERDO MARTÍN, JESÚS [Y] PABLO SÁNCHEZ LEÓN. *La guerra que nos han contado 1936 y nosotros*. Alianza, Madrid 2006. 320 pp. € 18.00.

Since the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, major changes can be observed in the literature about the social history of Spain. In books and articles, at scientific congresses and in public debates we can witness a strongly growing interest in the victims of the civil war and of Franco's rule.¹ Historians and the public at large have begun to focus on the history of the defeated in the war, and on the lives of those who, during the forty years of the Franco dictatorship, had no place in Spanish history and no voice or domain of memory in public memorials or places of remembrance. Especially the descendants (and to a lesser extent, the contemporaries) of these people, who previously had no history, now want to know how their ancestors lived, and how they died. A stream of publications is now appearing of previously untold stories, with pictures never shown before. This represents a great enrichment of Spanish history

1. This applies not only to Spain. See Antoon de Baets, *Gebruik en misbruik van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 2008). He discusses how in countries and regions such as Rwanda (for example), the polity controls the portrayal of history to convince the citizenry and adherents that history is on their side. They dictate how history is written, although, according to de Baets, history should never be imposed on people, because it belongs to individuals. Spain is exceptional in the sense that in this country, people became victims precisely because they aspired to a democratic republic for which they had chosen and fought, and for a social revolution which they strove for when their ideals and government promises were not realized. War and victims, civil war and casualties, revolution and opposition to it occur everywhere, but in Spain it was especially the forty years of dictatorship which makes the memory of the Civil War so different from other repressive regimes in regions such as Africa, eastern Europe, South America, and elsewhere.

with new source materials; making those materials publicly accessible in many cases also serves the goal of finally doing justice to the past, after many years of silence and obscurity.

The implication for Spanish historiography is that the difference between professional historical researchers and amateur historians, information searchers, and opinion makers has become blurred. It is hardly accidental that publications of personal reminiscences, which generally sell better than historical studies, are nowadays given a “scientific” image by publishers – by referring to the names, in the introduction or back cover, of luminaries such as Maurice Halbwachs, an expert in oral history, and Pierre Nora, the author of the path-breaking *Les lieux des memoires* – even although the writers themselves probably never studied their work. The increasingly “subjective” approach also has the consequence that there is less and less reflection about methodology in the historians’ enterprise.² That is also the conclusion drawn by the authors Izquierdo Martín and Sánchez León; it became a challenge for their epistemic inquiry about knowledge of the past, and the role and function of memory, words and language use in portraying it.

These authors also try to formulate new theoretical approaches, influenced by the political divisions in Spain which increasingly dominate the public debate about remembrance and history. From the year 2000, when the Zapatero government introduced the statute bill for La Ley de la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica [Reclamation of Historical Memory Act], and since the exhumation of massacred leftists has gained more and more publicity, this debate threatens to escalate – with more severe methods, and harsher words.

History and memory are far from neutral terrains, and reviving the traumatic experiences of war and dictatorship invites quarrels. Even today, more than seventy years after the beginning of the Civil War, and more than thirty years after the death of Franco, the historical debate is a theatre of political and cultural battles, including a battle over the appropriation of symbols. The debate is fiercely pursued by right-wing groups, who go on the offensive with a band of amateur historians. Pío Moa is one of their most prominent representatives, and his pro-Francoist “historically validated” publications like *Los mitos de la guerra civil* sell like hot cakes.³ In this way, a battle between different individual and group memories, and between divergent ways of viewing the past, is transformed into a veritable political battle. Izquierdo and Sánchez aim to find a scientific solution to this troubled quest for historical truth, and, for

2. Julián Casanova, “Pasado y presente de la Guerra civil española”, *Historia Social*, 60 (2008), special issue “20 años 1988–2008”, pp. 113–128.

3. Pío Moa, *Los mitos de la guerra civil* (Madrid, 2003).

this purpose, they study the succession of terminologies used to describe the past.

Another important point of controversy, among historians and publicists alike, concerns the question of whether politicians (and legislators) ought to be involved at all in making rules for the representation of historical memory. They question whether indeed the very concept of Ley de la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica is not already confusing, since the *memoria* is personally owned, and the state authorities – arguably – have no right to interfere in this, while *histórica* concerns history which is rightly practised and “made” only by professional historians. According to the critics, the remembrance business may “assist” the historian, but should not “dictate” the nature of his research.⁴ This sentiment again highlights the increasing emphasis on subjectivity observable in Spanish historical research, to which the authors Jesús Izquierdo Martín and Pablo Sánchez León seek to respond with some epistemic innovations.

Their book is an original, stimulating and insightful study, which provides much food for thought to readers concerned with recent developments in Spanish social history. Particularly original is the way the authors go about providing insight into the recent past to their colleagues and interested individuals, and the way in which they analyse Spanish historical science. A sketch of their own personal experiences, a history “from below”, forms the starting point for an historiographical overview of interpretations about the Second Republic and the Spanish Civil War (1931–1939) and the shifts in the images of history across this period. They proceed to demolish various historical myths, discovering an anachronism and petrification of “mega-historical” terminology as well as of the language used by historians, which contribute to what they call “the crisis in contemporary social history”.

Also original is their attempt to rescue social history from its “impasse” with an approach whereby the researcher tries to probe and understand the subjective experiential world and forms of expression of social actors in the past, and then place this history “from below” in a broader perspective. This requires a different method, in which language is again of central importance, as well as a new theoretical framework. The authors

4. Javier Cercas, a noted publicist and author of works such as *Soldados de Salamina* (Barcelona, 2001) for example, opines that the state would do well to establish legally that the history of the victims also gets a place in daily life, with the use of e.g. monuments and street names. The victims should be exhumed and identified – that is, he argues, the least to which their surviving relatives and friends should be entitled. A law could, and indeed should, be made which condemns Franco for crimes against humanity. But the state should not interfere in private memories and should not try to appropriate them. Additionally, historians should not allow themselves to be seduced into converting private memories into a science, but continue to pursue their discipline in an objective and professional way. See Javier Cercas, “La tiranía de la memoria”, *El País*, 2 November 2008.

do not regard their proposal as a blueprint for others to follow, but much more as a possible instrument to reach a breakthrough in the crisis of social history. They stimulate and invite their readers to contribute their own ideas, and raise new questions. But are they really offering a new methodology for historical knowledge, or are we dealing with old wine in new bottles? (The two obviously do not exclude each other).

The authors are certainly professional historians, but not specialists in the area of the Spanish Civil War. They present themselves as the “grand-children” of a generation which experienced the atrocities, from the point of view of the victims who lived through forty years of war and dictatorship with repression and silence. After an epoch in which the history of the victors dominated, the defeated are now seen to gain ground with the publication, rehabilitation, and commemoration of their own experiences. The authors regard themselves as “critical citizens” with expertise in the reconstruction of family histories – histories which are sometimes flatly counterposed to the official historiography.⁵

As citizens who have the right to their own histories and interpretation of the past, they criticize the way in which the past is shaped by scientific historians, who appropriate the exclusive right to interpretation without providing space for other interpretations and (often) mythical histories. Their plea is that professional historians should not hide with their stories behind a bulwark of “scientificity and positivism”, but instead actively enter into public debate. They advocate a place for the historical stories of ordinary citizens, next to those of the historians, in the official *Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, which became law on 31 October 2007: the histories of *all* the victims of the war and of the Franco dictatorship have right to a place in national history. Moreover, they are of the opinion that all these stories, irrespective of who produces them, actually follow the same kind of pattern, and that it is from a scientific point of view worthwhile to analyse them. This would, they argue, be an “enrichment of history” in many ways.

With an opportunity for a public historical debate and an improved epistemology for historiography, the authors hope that a foundation is laid for an “authentic” consciousness of the *ciudadanos*, the citizens.

5. The concept of “citizens” should be understood here as “political subjects”. From the founding of the republic, all inhabitants of Spain were recognized as equal participants of the Democratic Workers’ Republic. See Article 1 in the 1931 Constitution. A copy is available in the Willemse archive, reprint, Mexico D.F., no date, IISH, 10193.8, doc. 7, and Hanneke Willemse, *Pasado Compartido. Memorias de anarcosindicalistas de Albalate de Cinca, 1928–1938* (Zaragoza, 2002), p. 98. During the Franco period, however, the Spanish did not have political rights as “citizens”; independent unions and political parties were forbidden. See Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 4. At the same time, the writers also regard themselves as citizens, as victims of dramatic events which touched the whole of their people.

In turn, this would broaden and deepen democratic currents in the country, and thus offer a guarantee for a more stable society, in which the divergent collective memories can legitimately exist side by side. The opposing memories of the nationalists and the republicans, the victors and the victims, which are the residues of the war and its aftermath, can then be transformed into a shared national history. A problem is that the contemporary public “historical” debate is pursued especially by neo-Francoist “semi-professional” historians. Their opinions are almost the only ones which reach a wide public, and they contribute to a polarization of the left and the right; but that is, the authors argue, precisely what should be prevented. Moreover, professional historians in general do not deign to debate with the “would-be” historians, and indeed try to silence them.⁶

The book is divided into two parts: an historiographical-analytical part called “Stories as Heritage”, followed by an epistemological view about the future of history, “Designing for Other Stories, Newly Told”. The historiographical part is set against the background of the political and cultural developments in Spain during the 1930s, and is linked to epistemological applications. Taking an original approach, the authors opt to unmask the formation of myths in various perceptions of history.⁷ Using their personal experiences as a starting point, they describe how they, and others of their generation, personally became acquainted with the history of the war and of their grandparents. This usually happened in a family context, and the family stories became unique and indispensable, a part of family mythology that often served to create a collective identity, a sort of hiding place to escape from official history. Such mythologization, they note, occurs among both left-wing and right-wing families, and the family story, although perhaps polished and exaggerated over the years, in essence does not change.

A transition is then made by the authors from the family myth to the official history, in which various interpretations about the war were

6. The authors argue that negating the non-professionals implies not just that the general public hears only a neo-Francoist opinion, but also a lack of civility (as well as fear). “Today [they say] it is Pío Moa who is silenced to obscurity, tomorrow it could be our turn” – I cite from an interview with the authors by David Corominas, “La verdad, la memoria y la historia de la Guerra Civil española”, *Diagonal. Periódico quincenal de actualidad crítica*, at <http://www.diagonalperiodico.net/La-verdad-la-memoria-y-la-historia>, last accessed 21 May 2008. There are historians who do want to enter into this debate, such as Julián Casanova who in 2005 discussed publicly with historians on the Spanish broadcaster TVE about the Spanish Civil War. Sometimes one can also observe historians, often foreigners, in polemics on the digital highway *Libertad Digital* and in dailies like *El Mundo* and *El País*, to which Casanova also contributes. Casanova too is persuaded of the value of the historical story of ordinary citizens for official historiography and for historiographical renewal. The most important data about the civil war are, according to him, meanwhile already known; Casanova, “Pasado y presente de la guerra civil española”, pp. 113, 126–127.

7. The periodization does not differ from that provided e.g. by Ealham in *The Splintering of Spain* and Casanova in “Pasado y presente de la Guerra civil española”.

constructed by Franco and his supporters. Thus, initially, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Spanish war was officially interpreted as a “war of national liberation”, and a “crusade against the reds”, but in the 1950s and 1960s it was designated a “war among brothers” (*guerra fratricida*) and, later still, as a “collective error”. Even after the death of Franco, during the transition to democracy, this “war among brothers” perspective remained the dominant interpretation of the civil war. A “pact of silence” remained the official stance, to prevent reopening old wounds, and safeguard the still precarious political stability in Spain. The authors recall how, when they were still at school, they were reminded every school day of the myth of the “crusade against the red hordes” by a slogan inscribed on a monumental stone at the school entrance. In due course, this monument was changed according to the new “war among brothers” interpretation, when the regime realized the importance of people living together in harmony and being no longer at loggerheads with each other. Still later, this monument was also removed from the school yard, and largely expunged from memory. So also, outside the family sphere, only part of historical reality could be revealed, and a “socialization of ignorance” occurred, since any alternative knowledge of the history of the Franco regime was lacking. It produced a “schizoid” situation where the school exemplars and official history were completely at odds with the family history of the victims.

After the Franco mythology of the 1950s and 1960s about “crusades” and “war among brothers”, the next two decades were mainly silent about the war – the only notable exceptions being historical publications by foreigners, such as those by Hugh Thomas, Témine, and Broué.⁸ The teaching of history at school typically began at a point so far in the past, that one hardly reached the twentieth century, and in secondary and tertiary education, the Second Republic and the war were simply not mentioned. The effect was that until the 1990s, more than half the population had never been in contact with these themes. Breaking the silence and striving for quality in the dialogue about the recent past, the authors argue, ought to be an important foundation for the political culture of a democratic society; but instead there was a “collective amnesia” – a general silence. This official silence did, however, have the inadvertent consequence that family knowledge and local history grew more important. History was present in the streets, in public opinion, and questions were being asked that remained unanswered by professional historians. The great danger in all of this was that the “truth” remained hidden, with harmful consequences, because “the trauma’s which arise from lies can lead to collective illness”.⁹

8. Hugh Thomas, *La Guerra Civil en la Historia* (Paris, 1967); Emile Témine and Pierre Broué, *La revolución y la guerra de España* (Mexico City, 1977).

9. Angel Viñas, *La Alemania nazi y el 18 de julio: Antecedentes de la intervención alemana en la guerra civil española* (Madrid, 1977).

In 1977 the silence was broken under the pressure of public opinion, during a joint commemoration by survivors and historians of the bombardments at Guernica. They jointly signed a communiqué – as citizens, not as professionals – and in *El País* they demanded the rectification of the “Franco version of history” as well as public access to the war archives. It is significant, though, that it was in fact not a congress of historians, but a public debate in favour of democracy, which broke the spell of the Franco myth.¹⁰ At the school the authors attended, questions were being asked in response to Picasso’s painting, *Guernica*. Had the city been bombed or not, or could this be a Republican myth? Why did Picasso not want to return there while Franco was alive? The German evildoers supposedly acted on the invitation of the insurgents; but who were those insurgents? Up to that point, the authors did not know any better than that it had been the republicans.

The ruling party, UCD, responded to the communiqué, and gave permission to a group of historians to open the archives about Guernica, but strict conditions were attached to any change of the official historical interpretation. Under no condition could the Francoist perspective be revised, and any new interpretation could not be anti-Francoist. The politicians wanted an inquiry into the truth for the sake of truth, executed by impartial historians, which meant that the historians distanced themselves from the debates among fellow citizens, and became the “researchers of the truth”, the “specialists of impartiality”. The Franco myth about the bombardments was abandoned mainly by being no longer believed, and thus, intellectual efforts to demythologize these events also lessened.

Another great breakthrough in demolishing an important Franco myth, the “crusade against the reds”, was made by the non-Spanish but staunch republican, Herbert Southworth.¹¹ One of the effects was that a new historiography developed, based on the methodological criteria of demythologization. This implied the questioning of history and of other myths propagated by the victors. Thus, for example, the victors believed

10. History seems to repeat itself since the exhumation of fallen republicans from mass graves, with associated demands for recognition of the republican deaths, were begun in 2000 on citizens’ initiatives and later acknowledged by the state; Emilio Silva and Santiago Macías, *Las fosas de Franco. Los Republicanos que el dictador dejó en las cunetas* (Madrid, 2003).

11. Southworth analysed mainly existing sources, and did not provide substantial new data. He did not pretend to offer “the truth” either, or to supply proofs or refutations, because that would be propaganda; he only saw himself as being opposed to lies. See Herbert R. Southworth, *El mito de la Cruzada de Franco* (Paris, 1963). The publisher, Ruedo Ibérico, was led by Spanish exiles, who illegally disseminated anti-Franco literature in Spain during a time when there was no free press. See Albert Forment, *José Martínez: La epopeya de Ruedo Ibérico* (Barcelona, 2000). In his latest book, Southworth also uses existing but less well-known sources to demolish the Franco myth; see Herbert R. Southworth, *Conspiracy and the Spanish Civil War: The Brainwashing of Francisco Franco* (London [etc.], 2002).

that the war finished in 1939, while others contested this in a “paper war”, defending the opinion that the war continued after that point. The controversy lasted until the Transition, with the introduction of the Constitution in 1978, the return of the refugees, and the amnesty of the political prisoners of the dictatorship.

The authors also note changes in the school curriculum during the 1970s. The textbooks acquired a supplementary chapter about the Second Republic and the Civil War. On the one hand, this signified a reaffirmation of the Second Republic, endorsed by the established parties, institutions and unions, and proclaimed in the elections. But it also meant that in a weak republic, the communists, the “black sheep”, were credited with influence, as shown by the uprising in Asturias in 1934 when armed (left-wing) workers protested against the (right-wing) republican regime. In their school textbooks, the adverse characteristics of chaos and confusion were linked to the republic, while good, stabilizing features were attributed to the monarchy that preceded it.¹² In secondary and tertiary education, the new myth of a “war among brothers” became dominant. Guilt, it was now argued, could be found among both sides, and there were victims on both sides.

After the “great men” history and the “class struggle” interpretation during the first post-Franco period, a generation of historians emerged who focused on social groups such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but who did not research the history of their ancestors. Social scientific theory acquired great influence over analysis and conceptualization in the discipline of history. At the end of the 1980s, the imperatives “documentation”, “explication”, and “interpretation” became standard fare in social history. According to the authors, intellectual balance is currently under threat from the great emphasis placed on *interpretation*. This is what they refer to as the “crisis of social history”, which they diagnose now to be in a “degenerative” phase. The great emphasis on interpretation was partly a response and criticism of the influential Anglo-Saxon historians, who hardly paid attention to theory, and did not engage much in interpretation.¹³

Developments in social science and the philosophy of science were also influential, because they had the effect that discourses about social theory and epistemological positions gained the upper hand over empirical fact-finding. The danger now is that history will become a timeless whole, by focusing too much on structures, while neglecting historical contingencies. But on the other side, another danger also lurks: that structures

12. In this way the portrayal of history legitimated the kingship of Juan Carlos.

13. Santos Juliá, “Segunda República: por otro objeto de investigación”, in Manuel Tuñón de Lara et al., *Historiografía española contemporánea: X Coloquio del Centro de Investigaciones Hispánicas de la Universidad de Pau, balance y resumen* (Madrid, 1980).

disappear from view, if too much attention is given to accidental circumstances. As a result, the authors argue, a theoretical balance is absent. While the terrains of research have expanded, including, for example, the history of culture and mentalities, the authors see few empirical innovations in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. No new evaluative criteria have been developed to analyse the relationship between historical necessity and coincidence, and proper means to explain the mainly subjective facts have not been found.¹⁴

Izquierdo and Sánchez themselves try to find these by searching within the trinity of the imperatives “explication-interpretation-documentation” for possibilities to connect the different levels of analysis. For this purpose, they argue one should return to the original texts, the facts and the sources which have already been read, understood and interpreted, in order to compare and analyse them anew, with a critical eye for the meaning and function of language. Namely, interpretation of language use is essential for the knowledge of the past. When language is given central place in historical observation, and treated as the “builder” or maker of reality according to which the social actors act, this would – the authors argue – “represent breaking the old dichotomy between structure and action”.¹⁵ Language is one of the reference points of a collective memory, and words are not only vehicles for knowledge of reality, but also express moral values; the knowledge of their social valuation makes it possible to reformulate hypotheses. In reinterpreting words and language, historians should however avoid the use of “meta-historical magnitudes” – which the authors refer to with the term “naturalization” – such as “left” and “right”, “democracy” and “civil war”, because the content of such descriptions is changeable, and dependent on time and place. To illustrate this point, they critically investigate the function, meanings, and complexity of words which were core concepts in the history of the Second Republic, such as “power”, “war”, “citizens”, “crisis” etc. in order to reach a better understanding of historical reality.¹⁶

Broadly speaking, they find a consensus in word usage which, in the 1930s, and at the beginning of the Second Republic, was much less subject to controversy than later on; they show how the war was fuelled by an

14. Stanley Payne and Javier Tussell did try this in a joint publication, in which Payne revealed a conflict between the expectations of the masses, and what was realized by the political authorities, which stimulated renewal in social history. Payne however could not theoretically justify this adequately. See Stanley Payne and Javier Tussell, *La guerra civil. Una nueva visión del conflicto que dividió España* (Madrid, 1996).

15. Jesús Izquierdo Martín, “Review of Sandra Souto Kustrín, “¿Y Madrid? ¿Qué hace Madrid?” *Movimiento revolucionario y acción colectiva (1933–1936)* (Madrid, 2004)”, *IRSH*, 52 (2007), pp. 507–509, 508.

16. Earlier on, sociologists like Norbert Elias and his followers had made a case for such an approach.

escalating battle of words which destabilized social structures.¹⁷ As the conflicts deepened, they identify a “naturalization” when the war of 1936 was labelled with a meta-historical concept like “class war”, although a class struggle certainly raged. It would, they argue, be more appropriate to speak of a “social war”, because the conflicts and problems were most certainly social in nature. The concept of a “social war” is however much more inclusive than “class war”, because, while it implies class war, it also provides room to examine different political tendencies such as anarchism, socialism, republicanism or fascism, the supporters of which could belong to different classes. It also enables one to understand how poor day-labourers could be both fascist and republican, or desert to the enemy. The concept of “social” offers more scope than “class” to establish new identities emerging in the course of time, and define the shifts within social groupings in the realities of the 1930s. It is an attempt to remove the meta-historical concept of “class war” from history. Recent studies such as those by Francisco Espinosa (2005) and Sandra Souto Kustrín (2004), which they consider innovative because of the approaches chosen, are scrutinized for “naturalization” and here, too, the authors discover meta-historical magnitudes, anachronisms in language use, and myths which need to be exposed.¹⁸ A grand debate about such findings has yet to occur, however.

In the second part, “Designing for Other Stories, Newly Told”, the authors moot a possibility for historiographical renewal, by means of which they hope to provide an opportunity for reflection about the epistemology of the method of interpretation. In contrast to “The Grand Narrative of Social History”, the authors propose a return to history’s actors themselves and an analysis of their language use, to discover identification criteria, modes of inclusion and exclusion, the use of “we” and “they”, the interconnections of phenomena, and ideological assumptions. They refer to Rafael Cruz who researched language use in the Second Republic until the Civil War.¹⁹ After the founding of the Second Republic in 1931, the Democratic Republic of Workers “*de toda clase*”, members of society identified in the first instance as workers or they identified, to the contrary, with religion. Whoever spoke in the name

17. This opinion was shared by the English historian Anthony Beevor in his investigation of the Civil War. See Anthony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936–1939* (London, 2005), pp. 239–250. (But could the role and meaning of words be so decisive that, inversely, they could have prevented the battle?)

18. Francisco Espinosa Maestre, *El fenómeno revisionista o los fantasmas de la derecha española* (Seville, 2005); Souto Kustrín, “¿Y Madrid? ¿Qué hace Madrid?”. See also Izquierdo, “Review of Sandra Souto Kustrín”, pp. 507–509.

19. Rafael Cruz, *En el nombre del pueblo. República, rebelión y guerra en España de 1936* (Madrid, 2006).

of “the people” supported the republic; the nationalists claimed alternatives. A new terminology then emerged as the social tensions increased, especially after the first two years: *Nacionalistas, Fascistas, Rojos, Frente-popularistas, Republicanos, Marxistas*. From the elections of February 1936, the contradictions in language use intensified: the opposition became “the enemy” – the “distorter of reality” became a “falsifier of the truth”. The ferocity of the rhetoric reached a crescendo at the time of the coup d’état. In the months preceding it, the supporters of the republic had, almost poetically, spoken mainly in metaphors. Now both parties talked openly about “enemies”, almost assassinating each other with words, and they were very conscious of their choice of words – whereas previously the enemies had still been opponents respecting each other.

The war itself was also stoked by the “war of words”. In the first months, when the greatest number of fatal casualties occurred, the words radicalized and militarized, without referring to any particular army, and they were by no means used only by activists and militants. Words of death were used to honour friends, but especially to destroy the enemy. The right, in particular, used words which referred to beasts and monsters – body and soul are a unit; a monster is a deformed soul – and took over many words and images from Catholicism and religious belief generally. These confessional references – such as “crusade” – were not mentioned by the republicans, who used mainly a mountain of words; religion was referred to only in situations they were comparing themselves with. Their words were mainly directed to a future in which they would not be the dependents of a supernatural divinity, but self-managing subjects in their own right – not as individuals, but as a collectivity, such as “humanity”, “the people” etc. Nationalists also used elements of collectivist terminology, for example *España, Cristianidad, nación, estado*.

The war itself was not a religious one, yet it was a battle staged against the background of a strong religious tradition rooted in the social order, drenched by Catholicism. The nationalists strove for a Catholic monarchy, for a bond with the state. For the insurgents, the coup d’état of July 1936 signalled the end of the republic, and the return to a world that existed before liberalism: the Catholic faithful aimed to revive an old order without *citoyens*, such as it had been before the republic. Hence there was, the authors argue, no religious war, but rather a modern political war “with words about words”, with “conceptual magnitudes” which served only to obscure the real nature of the war, and unmask the ideology of the opposition.

The authors also investigate words such as “*Pueblo*”, “*People*”, “*Left*” and “*Right*”, and their social usage during the republic and the war. Thus, the proclamation of the republic had been a “revolutionary” act, but the term revolution was increasingly used by the republicans for their own social revolution, the meaning of which, by the way, differed for the socialists, anarchists, and communists, party-affiliates and trade-union

members; immediately before and during the war, the term “revolution” was increasingly used by the fascists to express “their” changes. As an example, the workers’ revolt of 1934 in Asturias is referred to. By contemporaries it was called a “social revolution”.²⁰ With regard to the civil war, the retrospectives of the neo-Francoist historians become an anachronism and naturalization; because, at the time, there was no perception of a “civil war” among the right-wing groupings. Namely, these groupings refused to recognize that all belonged to one and the same community, subject to the same rule of law, and they preferred to call their campaign a “war of national liberation”, a “holy war against evil”, a “crusade”, etc. The social unity of Spain was explicitly recognized only in the 1960s, when the war was renamed a “*guerra fratercida*” [“war between brothers”].

To the meta-historical concept of *naturalizacion* the authors counterpose another, more hermeneutic one, namely *alteridad*, the capacity to shift one’s own perspective in favour of the “other”, to immerse oneself in the lives of other people in other epochs, to see things from the point of view of their ideology and interests, without conceding the dignity of one’s own viewpoint. In this way, the past is represented as a time remote from our own, as a strange world, about which we can be curious, but which needs to be questioned to be able to enter it.²¹ Entry occurs primarily through language: we make the language, and we construct reality and our own identity with it. It implies that the ancestors could also have changed during the war, that their interests, their beliefs, their wishes and ideals could have changed. Only the war remained anchored in their reality, everything else underwent drastic changes. By probing all this, historians are offered the opportunity to liberate history from its myths.

Words *and* the imagination unite in the construction of metaphor, the symbolic value of language. The authors therefore make a case that, together with writers and artists, they should allow the imagination to speak. For this purpose, a number of novelists are discussed who paint a good picture of historical reality, and who bring various personalities and episodes to life, such as Javier Cercas in his *Soldados de Salamina*.²² The question then arises whether fiction can provide historians with an

20. This social revolution caused disarray in society which would culminate in a civil war. Thus, it was supposedly the defeated that had pushed the country into civil war, and the Right – Franco and his supporters – had prevented the country from disintegration. This, in summary, is the neo-Francoist argument in the contemporary public debate to justify the intervention by Franco.

21. This viewpoint is not completely new and the approach is not unknown in the oral history tradition. See for example David Löwenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge [etc.], 1985).

22. Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina*. This author is nevertheless found guilty of a form of “naturalization” because he equates several different wars. See Izquierdo Martín and Sánchez León, *La guerra que nos han contado*, pp. 254–261.

accurate portrait of the times, as a background for their research, given that the imagination roams freely, and is personal, and hence just as much susceptible to distortion and manipulation as human memory is. As a matter of fact, the authors take their argument much further, and propose a living dialogue with the ancestors, with the aid of a method of identification which actors sometimes apply to represent their characters on the stage – “getting under their skin”, as it were. The authors regard this practice as the supreme expression of the *alterizante* approach. Its essence is mutual recognition: “the process by which we change ourselves into other persons, more sensitive for the diversity of forms of human behaviour, for the variety of solutions of world problems, of the possible, combined forms of the past”.²³

To illustrate this idea, they refer to the play by the Catalan theatre troupe Els Joglars. Together with the historian/biographer Abel Paz, the actors prepared a play about the life of the famous anarchist leader Durruti. Aided by solid background research, the most fitting Durrutti characterization emerges from the troupe. The actors immerse themselves in the history before and after the war, and in this way the main character is able to unite with the persona of Durruti so well, that he is able to stay in his role even *outside* the theatre. Indeed, he threatens to lose his own identity in that of his ancestor.²⁴ Unclear in this example is the extent to which the impersonation provides us with an accurate historical picture of the “real” anarchist hero, and what the value of the “Durrutti theatre” can really be for the historian. The authors recommend that *alteridad* could become one of the key concepts in social history: when related to the contemporary debate about the so-called *memoria histórica*, *alteridad* could create new general approaches for the coexistence of the different histories.

After the promising, well-structured historiographical part of their study, the second part with their epistemic “renewal” is rather disappointing however. It is a pity that the authors, with their *alterizante* approach, did not consult their fellow historians more frequently, before tending to the imagination of novelists and artists. Oral historians are most certainly familiar with the curiosity for the past and the great capacity for empathy which they need to have, in order to place themselves in the shoes of interviewed subjects, and to arrive at histories “from

23. Magdalena González, Review of Izquierdo Martín and Sánchez León, *La guerra que nos han contado*, *Hispania nova*, *Revista electrónica de Historia Contemporánea*, 7 (2007), pp. 883–885, at <http://hispanianova.rediris.es/7/recensiones/7r005.htm>, last accessed 26 March 2008.

24. Izquierdo Martín and Sánchez León, *La guerra que nos han contado*, pp. 262–266. Is this an unintended consequence of the *alterizante* approach, without appropriate detachment by the historian and without adhering to the trinity documentation, explication and interpretation?

below” about men or women who otherwise would remain unknown. These historians also search for theoretical frameworks, and indeed consider them essential to retain an appropriate distance from their subjects. The tension between theory and practice, between the recording of the personal story and the writing of history, means a continual adjustment and refinement of old and new scientific boundaries.

To understand the memorized story of interviewed persons, oral historians confront precisely the kinds of problems which are also referred to in this book under the rubric of language and language use. From the outset, oral historians try to clarify the functioning of memory and isolate elements which influence the process of recollection and the activities of memory itself. The influence of the interviewer on the research is carefully scrutinized, just like the differences in words and language use by respondents from the past to the present, and the interpretation of words, language and memory.²⁵ In brief, there exists a whole terrain of relevant research methodology to which the authors regrettably hardly refer in the second part of this book. Women’s history, which developed as a discipline contemporaneously with oral history and fruitfully interacted with it, is also developing new theoretical frameworks to gain better knowledge of women’s lives. Women’s history yields, among other things, the finding that with research about language and words alone *insufficient* insight is gained into the history “from below” of “ordinary” women and men.

Investigations into social networks in a built environment and in the countryside yield insights about power relations which simply cannot be inferred from words alone. Artistic expressions and symbols, the meaning of street names and memorial plaques in the school yard – they all testify to a past which cannot be captured in language alone.²⁶ People had lives, and other testimonies of this reality also exist which must be understood in order to fully comprehend our ancestors. It is a pity, therefore, that the authors did not delve more deeply into these other sources of evidence, but insisted on language as the only residue from the past. For the time being, we may not know nearly enough about the past to make history out of it. Nevertheless, we are constantly making our history, and therein we must find our future.

25. Willemse, *Pasado Compartido*, pp. 415–430.

26. Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), pp. 1053–1075.